

Tanks defy ceasefire agreement in Croatia

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ZAGREB — Yugoslav army tanks shelled a Croatian village and killed a National Guard soldier yesterday after disobeying a ceasefire agreed by army officers, Croatia's assistant Interior Minister, Milan Brezak, said. Another guardsman was wounded and 15 houses were destroyed at Kraljevci, 30 miles south of Zagreb, he told a news conference.

The assaults, shortly after midnight and again at 4am local time, were launched from the nearby village of Jabukovac, home mainly to families of Croatia's Serbian minority, and followed clashes in the area on Sunday.

Mr Brezak said federal units at Jabukovac refused to pull back and deliberately broke a locally agreed ceasefire during the night "because they wanted to try to stage and provoke ethnic conflict. Some of the army officers are leading their own extra-terrestrial life which has nothing to do with agreements between civilian authorities," he said.

Federal army officers and Croatian government officials have begun an inquiry. Croatia said the incident would also be reported to European Community observers. The 20 observers, who left The Hague yesterday, will monitor the overall ceasefire negotiated by the EC between Yugoslavia and the republics of Croatia and Slovenia, which declared independence on 25 June. The unarmed civilian and military unit is the first to operate under the EC flag. Fifty staff will be deployed on an extendable three-month mandate.

The Croatian presidential adviser, Brano Salaj, told journalists: "We are in a state of *de facto* war and it is essential that we have impartial observers to tell the West what is happening."

From Donald Forbes
of Reuters

Sunday's clashes involved the army, Croatian forces and Serbian nationalist Chetnik gunmen opposed to Croatian independence. Chetniks occupied Kraljevci and three other Croatian villages for several hours, until they were retaken by Croatian forces. Army units present did not intervene.

The conflict ended when Croatian officials worked out a ceasefire with the army and a withdrawal by both sides. But in a Croatian tape recording of intercepted radio transmissions between the army's regional command and its armoured unit at Jabukovac, an officer identified as Letic repeatedly refused orders to leave. The officer, who reported he had 500 Chetniks under his command as well as his own men, told superiors he feared villagers at Jabukovac would be threatened if the army left them undefended.

According to the tape, Letic also refused to leave in a conversation with the army's district commander. He added: "If I withdraw, what will history say?" Commander: "Never mind history, just do what I tell you." Letic: "I hear what you say but I know what my responsibility is." Croatian authorities denied they had any intention of attacking Jabukovac, which lies on the edge of the mainly Serbian Krajina region of Croatia and has declared its autonomy from Zagreb.

Mr Brezak denied an army claim that yesterday's attack was in response to a mortar assault from the National Guard forces at Kraljevci. "These forces were armed only with rifles and pistols," he added.



Slovene forces laying anti-tank mines a few days ago. EC observers are to monitor the Slovenia-Yugoslavia ceasefire Photograph: David Ross