

Federal army pullout leaves Croatia isolated in the Balkan federation

# Green light for Slovene independence

By Laura Silber in Belgrade

FINANCIAL TIMES 20/7/91

THE decision by the Yugoslav state presidency to order the withdrawal of the federal army from breakaway Slovenia gives the tiny alpine republic the go-ahead to seek independence.

But that decision leaves Croatia isolated in the Balkan federation and

worried that the order from the top state/collective body gives Serbia, under Mr Slobodan Milosevic, its president, a chance to step up pressure for the incorporation of Serb-populated areas of Croatia into a greater Serbia.

General Veljko Kadijvic, the federal defence minister, last night said the army had set an August 15 deadline for the Yugoslav presidency to solve the country's crisis.

He said on Belgrade television: "The army has proposed that the state presidency immediately undertake urgent measures to open talks on the future of Yugoslavia, that they be continuous and end by August 15 at the latest." The army's ultimatum was not contained in the statement issued by the presidency on Thursday night which ordered the army to withdraw from Slovenia.

It was unclear what measures the army would take if the leaders of Yugoslavia's feuding republics are unable to



A Yugoslavian federal army tank at a burning barrier near the Slovene border during fighting this month

end their stalemate and reach a solution. But Gen Kadijvic warned the military will fight back if "war is imposed while the army is carrying out its assignment".

The largely Serb-officered federal army has been deployed in ethnically mixed border areas, ostensibly to separate the two hostile ethnic

groups. But Croats protest that the army is not a neutral force and has been defending Serbian interests.

With Croats frustrated in pursuit of their own independence, the danger is that isolated Croatia will become increasingly radicalised.

Croatian President Franjo Tudjman demanded yesterday

that the Yugoslav army should pull out of Croatia as well. "We want the army to return to barracks and then leave sovereign Croatia completely," he said.

Mr Stipe Mesic, the Croat who heads the country's collective presidency, was alone in his opposition to the army's withdrawal from Slovenia, which is effective immediately

and will be carried out over the next three months.

The military's decision to pull out of Slovenia is in line with the statement by Mr Borislav Jovic, Serbia's representative on the eight-man collective presidency, who argued that the Yugoslav army should not be stationed in those parts of the country which see it as an

occupying force.

About 70 people died in days' fighting between Slovene forces and federal troops as Slovenia and Croatia declared independence on June 25.

The federal army was shaken by the Slovene resistance and the death of 35 federal soldiers. The military action also risked setting off a collapse of the multi-ethnic Yugoslav armed forces. The 12,000 troops and equipment withdrawn from Slovenia will be relocated to Serbia and the republic of Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The Croatian government may now have to concede to demands for greater autonomy from its 600,000 strong Serbian minority. At least 12 per cent of Croatia's population of 4.5m Serbs have staged an armed uprising over the past year against the Croat government.

Since Croatia declared independence at least 30 Croat policemen have been killed while attempting to assert the republic's authority over predominantly Serbian villages in Croatia.

But after the brutal civil war of 1941, when tens of thousands of Serbs were killed in the Nazi-backed state of Croatia, Serbs refuse to live in an independent Croatia.