

Croatia fears conflict with federal army

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THE CROATIAN Defence Ministry announced yesterday it was issuing new guidelines to civil defence units for what it called the protection of people and property, as fears grew in Croatia of an intensification of conflict with the Serbian-dominated army. There were reports of clashes in several villages in mixed Serb and Croat areas of Croatia.

The moves followed the decision on Thursday night of the joint seven-man presidency of the Yugoslav federation to withdraw federal army forces from neighbouring Slovenia. This in effect paves the way for *de facto* recognition of Slovenia's self-declared independence.

The one dissenting voice was that of the current President, Stipe Mesic, a Croatian. For the de-

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in Zagreb

cision effectively isolates Croatia, and leaves it vulnerable to any moves by Serbia and the federal army to prevent it breaking away like Slovenia.

Croatia's current predicament is in large part a failure of its own diplomacy in predicting shifting alliances. Slovenia needed Croatia's support initially when they both made their declarations of independence nearly a month ago. Now the situation has changed. Slovenia, Serbia and the army have a common interest in withdrawing the army from Slovenia. Serbia has no obligations to a Serbian minority there and the 20,000 troops can be redeployed near Serbian areas of Croatia, making up for army numbers lost through defections. The test will be to see if the army will stake out those areas of a new federation.

The agreement further emphasises the need for diplomatic revision of the terms of the mandate given to the EC monitors. Hans van den Broek, the Dutch President of the European Council of Ministers, has interpreted the characteristically ambiguous language of the memorandum of understanding more closely to Croatia's view, and would permit greater freedom of action concerning future deployment in Croatia than understood by the head of the mission on the ground.

Croatian leaders were clearly worried by the decision to withdraw the federal army from Slovenia. Mario Nobile, a Croatian presidential adviser, said: "We are afraid these forces may be used

against us. Anyone in Yugoslavia or elsewhere who believes this can be a formula to solve the crisis is wrong. It can only complicate things as long as the withdrawal is limited to Slovenia."

Mr Nobile claimed the move broke an accord reached on 7 July between the EC, federal Yugoslav authorities and the two northern republics. Josip Manolic, the Croatian Prime Minister, was also critical, saying the agreement contradicted the Brioni declaration reached with the EC. But he played down fears that the army would step in. "The army cannot resolve political problems," he said. He warned that the decision could either mean one step "nearer the critical point" of war — or one step further away. "It depends if the army withdraws."

Already Croatia's predicament is severe. The economy has collapsed. Tourism, its main foreign currency earner, has dried up. Communications between different areas of Croatia are cut.

Croatia's President, Franjo Tudjman, said on returning from Germany that the agreement could be seen as "politically favourable". If the sovereignty of Slovenia was recognised, then so could that of Croatia. It was pure self-delusion. His faith in world public opinion may prove misplaced. His own lack of respect for the Serbian minority within Croatia has tarnished his campaign for self-determination.

The Croatian authorities now face the prospect of buckling under, of accepting there are greater forces deployed against them. Or they could drag Croatia into a bloody civil war which could engulf the whole country.

