

Killings mark most violent day in Yugoslavia

EVENING STANDARD

By Laura Silber in Belgrade

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TWENTY people were reported killed yesterday in clashes between Serbs and Croats in the worst day of violence in Yugoslavia this year, as the country's leaders gathered for peace talks.

The Croatian news agency claimed 14 Croatian guardsmen, five civilians and one Croatian policeman had been killed in fighting in Mirkovci, a Croatian town about 120km north-west of Belgrade, the Serbian and federal capital. Belgrade television said 16 people were killed altogether.

In conflicting reports, Tanjug, the Yugoslav news agency, said Croatian police and soldiers from the Croatian national guard launched three attacks on Mirkovci from surrounding villages. The first began at 5.30am, and was followed by others at 7.30 and 12.30. A Serbian civilian "had his throat slit while defending his village", said Tanjug. The number of injured yesterday could not be confirmed.

Tanjug reported that federal army units were prevented from entering Mirkovci yesterday morning, and that Serbs in the villages had appealed to Serbia for assistance.

Croatian police, however, said that Serbian nationalists attacked the neighbouring towns of Vinkovci and Stari Jankovci with mortars and machine-guns. Croatia Radio reported that federal army jets

were strafing the Vinkovci police station.

It claimed that Croatian forces had trapped federal troops in their barracks there, and had sealed off the town with extra forces to prevent attacks from Serbia.

About 30 people have been killed since Saturday in clashes between Serbs and Croatian police and national guardsmen. Croatian forces are trying to reassert the republic's authority over Serb-populated territories in eastern Croatia. Serbs, who make up 12 per cent of Croatia's population of 4.7m, are resisting Croatia's moves towards secession.

The state presidency and the presidents of the six republics began peace talks yesterday in Ohrid, a town in the republic of Macedonia. The federal defence minister and top federal officials also attended. However, Croatia's president, Mr Franjo Tudjman, abruptly flew home from the talks "because of the latest events in Croatia".

The escalating violence there was top of the agenda and the leaders ordered the demobilisation of paramilitary units in the republic. It was announced that they had agreed an "Ohrid document", expected to call for a non-aggression pact between the republics and concrete negotiations on a peaceful resolution to the crisis. Talks were to continue today.