

Army threatens to destroy Croat town

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**From Marc Champion
in Ilok, Yugoslavia**

THE CROATIAN police at Ilok had their first negotiations with Yugoslav federal army units defending the bridge into Serbia yesterday. "They told us that if one more bullet was shot at them, they would destroy the town," said Ilok's chief inspector of police, Dragan Puskaric.

Clashes between Croat police and army units on the bridge at Ilok have been escalating since 9 July. Every night there is shooting and so far two Croat policemen have been killed. But on Tuesday artillery was used, leaving several houses damaged. "Now they are threatening rockets," said Mr Puskaric. The main street was empty at midday.

The army says — and Croatia's National Guard is by no means beyond it — that it is being attacked every night and was forced to retaliate with tanks, gunboats and light artillery. Most of the shells end up in Ilok, whose population is almost exclusively Croat. But compared to neighbouring villages, Ilok has got off lightly so far.

As Mr Puskaric spoke, a jet roared overhead. "During the day they fly overhead to make us realise that our lives are not safe.

They want us to leave," he said. Then the lights went out. He shrugged: "It happens all the time. The power comes from the other side of the river."

Ilok is on a narrow strip of land between two Serbian provinces. "Until World War Two the population was mostly Serbian," said Sveto Mandic, leader of the Chetnik movement in Backa Palanka, at the other end of the bridge. He said the area should become part of a greater Serbia. Though he denied that the army "openly helped Chetnik guerrillas", he said they shared "a similarity of interests ... It is good that more people are deserting, because it is becoming a Serbian army now".

The federal army's aims are impossible to prove. It is supposed to be keeping the Chetniks and Croatian National Guard apart. Mr Mandic said that without the army, many more Croats would be dying. He confirmed that army trucks have been helping Serb farmers in Croatia to gather their

harvest and send it to Serbia.

Ljiljana Dokic, president of the Serbian Democratic Party in Backa Palanka, still crosses the bridge to go to her weekend house. "I feel no threat from the Croats," she said. "This is a dirty war being fought by politicians, who are afraid that without violence they will lose their positions." That went for the (Communist) Serbian president, Slobodan Milosevic, and the Croat president, Franjo Tudjman, both of whom came to power on the strength of their nationalist rhetoric. "[Backa Palanka] is a centre for all these activities," said Mrs Dokic. "The Chetniks go across the river at night and fire on Croat villages from the forest and then come back. Then the police attacked Borovo Selo [a Serbian village] and Serbs who never would have been involved start fighting."

She did not doubt that Serbs in Croatia were under threat, but believed the government was doing nothing to stop it. "I don't think the Chetniks know or care whose pocket they are in. They are the dregs of the town, with nothing to lose but their lives."