

Croatians die as tanks fire on village

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By Laura Silber in Erdut, eastern Croatia

AT LEAST nine soldiers from Croatia's national guard were killed and 17 wounded early yesterday when Yugoslav army tanks fired on them across the Danube from neighbouring Serbia. The guards were killed in their barracks in Erdut, a village in eastern Croatia, the Belgrade-based Tanjug news agency reported. The barracks were virtually destroyed.

In a conflicting report the army said Croat guards shot first and "the army was forced to answer fiercely".

At least 40 Croats and Serbs have been killed since last Saturday in fighting between Croatia's Serbian minority and Croatian national guardsmen.

Yesterday saw the worst fighting so far between Croats and the army since the conflict began following Croatia's declaration of independence from the Yugoslav federation of 23.5m people on June 25.

The army has said it will only act to stop inter-ethnic conflict. But Mr Josip Kremenje, a Croatian reserve policeman, said the army had warned it would blow up Erdut, which is ethnically mixed.

"We don't know if the guards attacked but what would they attack with? At 2am they cut off the electricity and then started artillery barrage," Mr Kremenje said.

"A political solution and an end to the killings seems remote. I used to believe Yugoslavia's leaders could find a way out of war and keep the country together. But not any more. Look at what the army has done."

Three houses were destroyed and a Serbian orthodox church. Erdut has a mixed population of 2,000 of whom 60 per cent are Croats.

Mr Stjepan Zoric, a local community leader, said: "Here we have Serbs, Croats and Hungarians but there have

been no incidents between the common people. We are all equally endangered and want nothing else but peace."

Telephone lines were cut off yesterday in Erdut. Roads are blocked by numerous barricades. Croatian police ring the town, and the army in turn has blocked the roads leading over the bridge towards Serbia.

Converted farms and agricultural combines now house hundreds of Yugoslav army reservists who sit in the camps in the shadows of about 80 tanks trying to escape the summer heat.

A lieutenant on the "Brotherhood and Unity Bridge" over the Danube asked foreign journalists if it was peaceful now in Erdut. He appeared proud that the army tanks had hit the Croatian national guard barracks. "We have good aim, what do you expect?" he said.

Mr Stipe Mesic, a Croat and current head of Yugoslavia's rotating federal presidency, has called a meeting today of the presidency to discuss the crisis.

About 50 unarmed EC observers are taking up positions in the northern republic of Slovenia and are conducting limited operations in Croatia, but they said they would avoid areas of conflict.

The heads of state and foreign ministers of Italy, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Austria and Czechoslovakia meet in Dubrovnik today and Saturday. Yugoslavia's federal leaders are due to discuss the crisis with EC leaders in Brussels on Monday.

● Thirty thousand tons of weapons, munitions and other military hardware were being unloaded in the southern Yugoslav port of Bar yesterday, according to dock officials, Reuter reports from Belgrade. The cargo includes speedboats and helicopters, as well as arms and ammunition.