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EC to seek action on Yugoslavia

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THE INDEPENDENT

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FRANCE is canvassing plans for stepping up the European Community's peace-keeping role in Yugoslavia by sending in troops to act as a buffer force should the bloodshed escalate.

Other EC countries are considering the idea of a peace conference under the auspices of the European Community, with all parties in the conflict present.

Such plans are being mooted ahead of a meeting on Monday of the EC foreign ministers, when attempts will be made to boost the Twelve's flagging peace effort in Yugoslavia, which is concentrated on the presence of monitors to observe the ceasefire.

Violence has continued to flare in Croatia, where at least 36 Serbs and Croats have been killed since Friday and there are fears of a full-scale civil war.

The most radical new proposal comes from the French, who envisage a military force drawn from several countries which would be placed under the control of the nine-member Western European Union (WEU), the defence body which the French would like to become a full-blown defence arm of the European Community.

Although the French are arguing that the precedent for joint military intervention by the WEU was set during the Gulf war, when it helped to co-ordinate the European effort, such action in Yugoslavia would be viewed as highly controversial within the European Community. The Community is currently debating how much of a defence role it should take on. The British and the Dutch — who hold the EC presidency — are resisting the idea of a full defence arm, because of the damage it could do to the Nato partnership.

However, although the French idea will meet with resistance, it is clear that the EC foreign ministers will be keen to find a new impetus for their peace efforts in Yugoslavia, which have been swept aside by renewed violence.

The EC has invited the Yugoslav Prime Minister, Ante Marko-

vic, and the Foreign Minister, Budimir Loncar, to meet the EC ministers over lunch on Monday to discuss possible initiatives. France, Germany and Luxembourg are pressing the other Community states to extend this invitation to all eight members of Yugoslavia's collective presidency.

The French may table their ideas for military intervention at the Brussels EC meeting should the violence appear to demand urgent action, although officials emphasise that it is not yet a firm French proposal.

"If the Croats and the Serbs keep on bleeding each other to death on our doorsteps, we cannot just sit back and watch," said a senior French official. "We will have to think in terms of interposing a force to extend the Twelve's efforts."

Reacting to the suggestion yesterday one British official said: "There is no mandate for this idea. It would mean a significant increase in EC involvement."

Other ideas, short of military intervention, which the EC is likely to discuss on Monday would be to convene a special conference with the Community in the chair. This too would build on the EC's new, high-profile role as international peace-broker. The Twelve will listen to a special Dutch emissary who has been to Yugoslavia to see whether there is scope for such a conference. The ministers will also consider extending the area to be covered by the EC monitors to Serbian enclaves in Croatia where fighting has continued.

However, British officials say this could only be agreed once a ceasefire in these areas had been achieved — otherwise the safety of the monitors could not be ensured. It is precisely to cope with such a situation — where a ceasefire cannot be achieved — that the French plan could come into play.