

# Nine guardsmen die in Croatian border skirmish

THE INDEPENDENT 26/7/91

NINE Croatian National Guardsmen were killed and 17 wounded while asleep in their barracks yesterday morning, in what is emerging as a lopsided, undeclared campaign for the border between east Croatia and Serbia.

Yugoslav federal army units launched shells, rockets and anti-aircraft fire across the River Danube on the village of Erdut at 1.50am, leaving three houses and a barracks of the Croatia National Guard in ruins. The fighting fitted a pattern of escalating skirmishes across the Danube where it separates Croatia from the Serbian province of Vojvodina. Just as on Wednesday at the bridge at Ilok, 60 miles away, the army commander at Erdut yesterday told Croatian police that he would "destroy the town" if the army were shot at again.

Three houses in the neighbourhood of the National Guard headquarters in Erdut were hit, one of them reduced to rubble. According to an army officer on the bridge last night, his troops were subjected to sniper fire from the village beginning at 10pm. Locals said they heard gunfire erupt 15 minutes before the shelling began.

"They have been warning us for five days that they would destroy the town," said Tomislav Kristic, explaining why none of his family

## From Marc Champion in Erdut, Croatia

had been hurt when his house was shelled. "We had just got the children outside when it was hit," said Mr Kristic. Two mortar shells ripped into the house, destroying the kitchen and living room.

The National Guard barracks 2 miles out of Erdut was apparently blown apart without warning. Three gaping holes in the roof of the hostel at the village's children's recreation centre showed where the mortar and tank shells had struck. Six died immediately and three later in hospital. The hostel was still smouldering yesterday afternoon, its bunks and cupboards turned to kindling. "They killed us when we were asleep," said Iosip Kremenj, a Croatian policeman guarding the Bridge of Friendship and Unity. "There were people without hands and feet, it was awful."

A statement from the army said that its units (which are backed up by more than 40 main battle tanks and as many armoured personnel carriers) were attacked and responded "fiercely". They suffered no casualties. Perhaps supporting their charge, two patrol cars had been abandoned at the National Guard hostel, shot to pieces, their

keys still in the ignition. Army troops did not enter the village during their attack, implying that the patrol cars had approached army positions on the bridge.

Sixty per cent of the 2,000 villagers of Erdut comprise are Croats, 30 per cent Serbs and 10 per cent Hungarians. "We never had any problems between Croats and Serbs until now," said Mr Kristic, a Croat who rents his house from a Serb. "I don't know what it's all about."

As at Ilok, the army has stationed gunboats under the bridge and have placed tanks and anti-aircraft guns at each end. The Croats had assembled the remnants of mortar and tank shells for viewing at the village pool room. "Life will never be normal here again," said Mr Kristic.

A federal army commander at Odzaci refused to speak and took some hours of persuading to allow journalists to cross the bridge at all. His troops however were in high spirits, offering beer to all comers. The local barman said the attacks had lit up the sky as if it were day even in Odzaci, which is 10 miles from Erdut. "What did you see in Erdut?" asked a young officer in charge of the tank placement at the Erdut end of the bridge. Some shelled houses. "We aim well, don't we?"



A Croatian woman, resisting the temptation to flee the fighting near her village, Hrastovac, hangs loaves to dry in the sun outside the house where she was born Photograph: AP