

Serb fighters carve out new border

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From Marc Champion
in Dalj, Croatia

WHATEVER the representatives of Yugoslavia's collective presidency might have resolved at their meeting in Belgrade to discuss the bloodshed in Croatia yesterday, the course of an eastern border between the hypothetical new states of Serbia and Croatia had been fixed without them.

One met it in the Serbian village of Bijelo Brdo at barricades manned by villagers toting ageing weapons, including an Al Capone-era Thompson machine-gun. A grubby Yugoslav flag was draped across farm trucks at either end of the village. The guards feared attack and were reluctant to speak.

From here, the new border would run south to include the Serb villages of Tenja, Ada and Markusica. Then it would curve to cut between the warring towns of Vinkovci and Mirkovci, turning south to meet the current border with the Serbian province of Vojvodina.

At the moment, only about 30 per cent of the population between this line and the current republican border is Serbian. "They need to intimidate everyone else into leaving so as to have some

kind of legitimacy when they finally claim the land," said Bozidar Riba, the vice-mayor of Osijek, the regional centre. He said the new border had formed itself, including all of the primarily Serbian villages in Slavonia.

Mr Riba saw an organised campaign in which Serb extremists — or *Chetniks* — have alarmed villagers so much that they are barricading themselves in and mortar shelling neighbouring Croatian villages. Celijska, a small Croatian village isolated among Serbs, has been deserted after heavy shelling. The Hungarian villages of Laslovo and Korog fear the same fate.

"Once it begins these people cannot stop, because they know they will go to jail if Croatia keeps control," said Ivan Kovcalijce, the police chief in Dalj.

That was a tepid version of what the boy with the Tommy gun in Bijelo Brdo had to say. "If the Croats take charge they will slaughter us like they did in the war. You foreigners do not understand." Fears that the fighting could spiral to unlimited barbarity have driven as many as 27,000 Serbs and many Croat refugees from Slavonia.

The roads linking villages are deserted, but for the odd police

checkpoint or amateur barricade. Many people cannot get to work, and the local economy has ground to a halt. By yesterday, Dalj was virtually cut off, with the army blocking the bridge to Serbia and barricades on the roads south and west.

From Croat officials to Serbian villagers, everyone was agreed on one point: that most of the blame for the continuing bloodshed lies with the republican politicians who met yesterday in Belgrade to try to end it. "None of the nation-

alities want war. It is the leaders who are pushing it on us," said the head of Dalj's angling club, who preferred not to give his name.

A Serb in a Croat-dominated town, he went on Tuesday with a delegation of Serbs, Croats, Hungarians and self-described Yugoslavs to Osijek. There they discussed with the mayor ways of keeping the inter-ethnic violence out of their villages.

"I don't claim that we are pure," said Mato Matosevic, a reservist in the Dalj police. He men-

tioned recent fighting between army and police units at Erdut. "Our guards are young and probably drunk sometimes. They may occasionally be the ones who start the shooting." But he was horrified by the fearsome firepower which the army, for the first time, unleashed on Thursday on Erdut, killing nine guards and wounding 17 while they slept.

"We are just waiting here for them to come across the Danube with the tanks, that is the next stage," said Mr Kovcalijce. At least 40 tanks have been moved into villages across the bridge from Erdut. "We have nothing to respond with but rifles, and nowhere to go," he said.

Relations between the army and the Croatian authorities are at a low ebb. "They want to show us that we have no choice but to accept Serbian policies," said Mr Kovcalijce.

On Thursday Croatia's railways said they would no longer transport federal army soldiers or equipment. The army's intentions are not yet clear, but Mr Riba held out little hope for peace. "They say they must stay to protect the Serb minority, and we know the fighting will not stop until the army leaves, because the terrorists are using it as a shield."

