

EC peace bid as battles rock Croatia

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From DENISE CLAVELUX in Brussels

A EUROPEAN initiative to halt the mounting bloodshed in Croatia was expected today, after battles over the weekend left dozens killed and injured.

Twenty civilians and at least 16 Croatian national guardsmen and police died as fighting between Serbs and Croats threatened to escalate into all-out civil war. It brought the death toll over the week to 80 and was the worst violence since the republic declared independence from Yugoslavia on June 25.

A Western diplomat said: 'What happened in the past 48 hours was, in effect, a localised civil war with all the ingredients to go further if those pulling the strings want it.'

With fears growing that the violence will spill into other European countries, EC Foreign Ministers are expected to agree today, at talks in Brussels with Yugoslav officials, to despatch a ceasefire negotiating team immediately.

They will also be asked to send in more observers. Fifty are already in Slovenia following recent successful EC ceasefire negotiations there.

British diplomats say Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd will oppose an Italian plan to send in armed European peacekeeping troops. He believes any military intervention should come from the United Nations.

The fighting has involved Croatian forces, ethnic Serbian militia and the federal army.

Serbs make up 10 per cent of Croatia's population. The republic's leaders say the Serb-led army is helping the militia and wants soldiers returned to barracks as a first step in any peace initiative.

The army insists it steps in only when it has to separate the warring factions.

It said yesterday it had faced 126 'attacks and provocations' over the past ten weeks, most of them from the Croatian forces.



Deadly harvest: Croatians patrol in a cornfield