

Croat leader warns his people of 'all-out war within days'

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RELATIONS between Croats and Serbs plunged to new depths of bitterness and recrimination yesterday as fighting erupted hours after Mr Franjo Tudjman, the Croatian president, stormed out of a meeting of Yugoslav leaders in the lakeside resort town of Ohrid.

In an emotional television address Mr Tudjman told Croats not to be provoked but to prepare for "all-out war, possibly within days" in defence of Croatia. Earlier at Ohrid he had rejected demands by the presidents of Serbia and other republics for the demobilisation of "all illegal formations and reserve forces in Croatia".

The federal order for Croatian units to disarm was also rejected by Mr Stipe Mesic, the Croat who currently chairs the collective state presidency. He accused Serbia of seeking to annex parts of Croatian territory. "Serbia is not fighting for the rights of Serbs in Croatia but for the Croatian territories where Serbs live," he said.

Croat representatives called for the withdrawal to barracks of the largely Serb-officered federal army in Croatia. But Mr Borisav Jovic, Serbia's representative on the collective presidency, argued that if the presidency accepted the Croat demand "we would have open civil war and blood up to our knees".

Mr Kiro Gligorov, the Macedonian president, said that the federal leadership would ask for European Community

observers, currently monitoring the truce between Slovenian and federal forces in Slovenia, to be deployed in Croatia.

But diplomatic sources say EC involvement in the ethnic conflicts between irregular units in Croatia or Bosnia would risk them getting embroiled in a Lebanon-style conflict, totally different from the clearly delineated situation in ethnically homogeneous Slovenia.

A senior Dutch diplomat, Mr Henry Wijnaendts, was expected in Belgrade to urge further negotiations between the republics, but the Dutch Foreign Ministry said there were no immediate plans to expand the EC monitoring.

Units of the federal army are stationed in ethnically mixed Croatian villages ostensibly to keep the warring groups apart. But Croats complain that the army is intervening to defend Serb minorities and turning a blind eye to attacks on Croats by armed Serb "Chetnik" groups.

Two Croat policemen were killed yesterday in a battle with Serb villagers in Palaca, eastern Croatia, after more than 20 people were killed on Monday in clashes between Croat policemen and Serbs in the heaviest violence this year.

Fighting was also reported between federal troops and Croat forces on one of the two main bridges over the Danube, which marks the border between the Serbian province of Vojvodina and Croatia.