

EC's politicians THE INDEPENDENT face up to the 31/7/91 reality of Croatia

THE DECISION by the European Community to beef up its team of observers in Yugoslavia — and to send them into the warring areas of Croatia, not just Slovenia — is one indication that Europe's politicians have come to realise that Yugoslavia's growing Serb-Croat civil war cannot be ignored indefinitely.

The Community was gung-ho to solve the problems created by the Yugoslav army's war on Slovenia last month. Three EC foreign ministers flew backwards and forwards, brokering ceasefires. But Slovenia was, from the start, an easier problem. After the Yugoslav conscript army received its drubbing at the hands of the Slovenes, Belgrade seemed almost glad of the excuse to retreat.

Meanwhile, the fighting in Croatia got worse, by the day. But Europe's politicians seemed determined to ignore the clashes — which contained the potential for huge long-term bloodshed. The monitoring team, though based in the Croatian capital, Zagreb, had no remit until now to visit the areas of violence in Croatia.

At talks on the Adriatic island of Brioni this month, where EC foreign ministers met Yugoslav republican leaders, the West Europeans scarcely addressed the question of events in the mixed areas of Croatia, saying only that EC observers might "possibly" be dispatched to Croatia.

Later, as the bloodshed in Croatia got worse, the EC said that the observers would be active only in Slovenia, where the war was effectively over.

Now, when the number of fatalities in Croatia is already in the hundreds — more than 100 are reported to have died this weekend alone — the Community has understood that if its role as a regional peace-broker is to be real, the problems in Croatia cannot be put to one side.

EC diplomats emphasise that they cannot be expected to impose a ceasefire, only to monitor it. Contrary to appearances, the European Community *does* have clout. The Community is seen throughout Eastern Europe as a powerful group which, because of its economic and political power, would be dangerous to defy.

Like the United States, Britain continued till a late stage to emphasise the importance, above all, of Yugoslav unity, thus appearing to give Belgrade the green light for its armed intervention in Slovenia. Others, however, took a different line.

When the Yugoslav crisis ex-

Europe knows it must tackle the Serb-Croat civil war in brokering peace in Yugoslavia, writes Steve Crawshaw, East Europe Editor

ploded, Slovenia's closest neighbour, Austria, was the first to provide explicit support for Slovenia's attempts to break free. But Germany, emphasising the importance of "self-determination" — an important buzzword during the collapse of East Germany in 1989 and 1990 — was not far behind, when Yugoslavia began to slip into civil war.

There is a certain asymmetry in the German approach. Bonn has been one of the most pro-unity in the Soviet context, and has given little quarter to the aspirations of the Baltic republics for restored independence. Helmut Kohl, the German Chancellor, feels gratitude to Mikhail Gorbachev for the fact that he allowed German unification to go ahead, without the use or even threat of tanks. In Yugoslavia, however, Germany has not felt so constrained in its support for self-determination. Belgrade has been indignant at what it sees as German interference. The phrase "Fourth Reich" has become commonplace in Serbian papers, as a phrase for what Serbs see as a renewed German bid to dominate the region. The implication is that Bonn could only have cynical reasons for giving comfort to the Slovenes.

Meanwhile, France — which initially distanced itself from any support for the breakaway republics — called last week for an armed peace-keeping force in Croatia. Subsequently, France appeared to take fright at the boldness of its own idea.

The question of carrying weapons continues to be crucial, however: there have been prolonged arguments as to whether the EC observers should be authorised to carry handguns, which — though presumably ineffectual — would be a radical departure in EC foreign policy terms from anything yet seen.

The burden still lies with the Serbs and Croats themselves — and with the Yugoslav army, which has partly lined up behind the Serbs. There still seems to be little inclination even to talk. If the Community can persuade the different factions to sit round a table together, that in itself could be seen as a success of a kind.