

Yugoslav president storms out of meeting

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EFFORTS by Yugoslavia's feuding leaders to end the bloodshed in Croatia appeared to collapse last night when President Stipe Mesic stormed out of a crisis meeting of the State Presidency.

Croatian Radio said Mr Mesic, a Croat, rejected a plan by the eight-member presidency to form a special commission under the Vice-President, Branko Kostic, to supervise a ceasefire in Croatia. According to reports, the commission will also include the Yugoslav defence, interior and justice ministers.

The Croatian President, Franjo Tudjman, said earlier he was boycotting the meeting, after a further night of violence rocked the republic. In a letter to the presidency, Mr Tudjman said his non-attendance was a protest "against the escalation of terrorism, supported by Serbia and sections of the Yugoslav army".

Croatian leaders offered at the weekend to accept a proposal by the presidency for a ceasefire, as the first step towards the return to barracks of Yugoslav army units. The violence in Croatia has claimed more than 100 lives in recent weeks in three-way clashes between Croatian police units, local Serbian guerrillas, and the Yugoslav army.

Fighting continued in Croatia throughout Monday night, with bombings and shootings in several villages. Unusually, no deaths were reported. But the worst clashes took place in the Banja region, only 30 miles south of Zagreb, where Serbian rebels are fighting to extend the northern borders of the rebel-controlled Krajina region.

In the town of Kostajnica, on the Croatian-Bosnian border, Serbian militants yesterday launched a grenade attack on the police station. Croatian police reported that Yugoslav air force jets had opened fire on the town, killing at least one policeman.

Croatian leaders predict that a big Serbian offensive will take place later this week against the

From Marcus Tanner
in Zagreb
and agencies

towns of Sisak and Petrinja, just south of Zagreb, and against Osijek, a city in eastern Croatia.

Milan Brezak, the Croatian Deputy Interior Minister, said "intensive preparations" were taking place among the Serbian guerrillas for the attack. But Mr Brezak insisted that the hard-pressed and poorly armed Croatian police force was "completely prepared for war".

Columns of Croatian refugees, meanwhile, streamed out of several villages south of Zagreb yesterday, fleeing from the Serbian onslaught which took place on Monday.

Nearly 200 residents from the village of Struga arrived in Sisak on tractors, clutching whatever possessions they could bring by hand, after a Serbian attack against the village, in which at least seven people were killed.

Yugoslav army units only moved in to occupy the village when the Serbian militants had seized control and the mostly Croatian inhabitants had fled. Red Cross officials in Sisak said they were preparing to receive 3,000 refugees from nearby villages.

The purpose of the Serbian attacks was to force all Croatian people to leave the Banja region, to pave the way for the creation of "Greater Serbia", according to Djuro Brodarac, the police chief in Sisak. "The second phase will be to massacre any Croatians that remain behind," he claimed.

Sime Djodan, the Croatian Defence Minister, said that Yugoslav army units have distributed thousands of grenades, mines and machine-guns to the Serbian militants fighting in Croatia. He warned that "total war" between Croatia and Serbia would cause "millions, not thousands" of deaths and will involve "the whole of Eastern Europe, including Hungary, Bulgaria and Albania".