

## Balkan powder keg is set to explode

Contrary to assurances by the Yugoslav federal government on Jan. 22 that it would take no military action against the republics of Slovenia and Croatia, sources in Croatia told *EIR* that the danger of just such a showdown remains very much alive. The political crisis in the country came to a head on Jan. 9, when the central government in Belgrade demanded the disarming of "illegal paramilitary groups that are planning terrorist acts and pose an immediate threat of armed insurrection," giving a deadline of Jan. 19.

Croatia and Slovenia refused to back down, and deployed their special police units to protect government buildings, as well as television and radio headquarters. "If we are attacked by the Army, we will shoot back, of course," declared a special police officer standing guard at a government building in Zagreb. The deadline was extended to Jan. 21, and then that deadline also passed.

The fear among Slovenes and Croats is that, although the eight-man federal presidency in Belgrade said in an official statement on Jan. 22 that "fear of alleged intervention by the Yugoslav People's Army is baseless," nevertheless a Yugoslav Army move could occur as international attention is diverted by the Gulf crisis, and as the Yugoslav Army takes its cue from Soviet military and Interior Ministry hardliners in the Baltic republics of Lithuania and Latvia. The Yugoslav Army is dominated by Serbs and communists; Serbia is communist-ruled, but Croatia and Slovenia kicked out their communist governments last year, and are seeking independence and closer alignment with the West.

On Jan. 14, the eve of the outbreak of the U.S. war against Iraq, one British intelligence analyst said that an explosion in the Balkans was a very likely scenario. "Watch the Balkans," said Joseph de Courcy of the newsletter *Intelligence Digest*. "Something might happen." He pointed out that Yugoslavia and Albania were on the verge of civil war, while Turkey has been dangerously destabilized by the actions of the United States and the Europeans in the Gulf. "The European Community will deeply regret this, because Turkey is absolutely key," he said.

### Military coup in Croatia or Slovenia?

The Yugoslav Army newspaper *Narodna Armija* on Jan. 19 railed against what it called "major criminal actions,"

claiming especially that there had been illegal distribution of weapons to "paramilitary units" in the two republics. The paper said this was a "criminal act" against the Socialist Yugoslav Republic, amounting to "armed mutiny" and the undermining of the defense of the nation.

For those caught engaging in such actions, the Army paper warned, the punishment would be a prison sentence of 15 years. Earlier, the paper had demanded a government crackdown against draftees who evaded service in the Yugoslav Army, in favor of joining the newly created Slovenian militia.

As the federal government's deadline came and went, Croatian President Franjo Tudjman issued a statement warning Belgrade not to exploit the war in the Persian Gulf in order to carry out a "coup" in Croatia and Slovenia. He had previously warned, on Jan. 17, "I am being approached by people who fear that those who go in for the idea of renewing the communist order, who want to impose the idea of a centralist Yugoslavia, may use the world's preoccupation with the Gulf war and attempt armed intervention in Croatia and Yugoslavia. To us, this [Gulf war] is of special significance, because in these European expanses, tendencies also arise to solve outstanding issues by force."

In the event of an attack, "we will respond," Tudjman said, and affirmed that "already in the first day [of fighting], 90% of Croatian officers and soldiers will desert" from the Yugoslav Army.

On Jan. 21, *Vjesnik*, the principal daily in Zagreb, Croatia, ran a headline warning, "Coup d'état: the beginning of the end of Yugoslavia." The Croatian Liberal Party has sent a call to all the Liberal Parties of Europe, asking for an initiative by them to stop "the internationalization of the conflict in Yugoslavia. Croatia's largest party, the Croatian Democratic Movement, issued a statement proclaiming that if Croatia is attacked, it is ready to fight, no matter what the casualties.

Our sources in Zagreb report panic buying in Croatia's supermarkets, as housewives hoard supplies in anticipation of violence. Seventy thousand women in Zagreb signed a petition against "civil war."

Forty percent of Slovenes polled fear a military putsch in the coming days. Slovenes are particularly worried about a tank brigade stationed south of the city of Ljubljana. This unit is composed of Serbians and is an elite formation.

Slovenian Interior Minister Igor Bavcar said that in the event of a violent attack by the Army, the Slovenian government would authorize armed resistance.

### Lack of Western support

In this situation, the governments of Slovenia and Croatia are angry about the lack of support from Western governments. Stated Slovenia's President Milan Kucan on Jan. 20: "I don't know why the West doesn't support us more. We get benevolent smiles, but nothing else."