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YUGOSLAVIA:

Civil Conflict Likely in Croatia

Street demonstrations and reports of military maneuvers show that tension between Serbs and Croats in Croatia is increasing; a referendum on Serbian autonomy tomorrow could trigger civil conflict and topple the Croatian nationalist government of Franjo Tudjman.

Tension in Croatia is at a fever pitch over the referendum, which Croat authorities have denounced as illegal and have vowed to suppress. Anti-Croat demonstrations occurred yesterday in several predominantly Serbian towns. Reports that Croatian police units were preparing to intervene led Serbs in Knin and other towns to set up roadblocks and to call for federal military intervention. Serbs in Bosnia and Serbia and Montenegrins are expressing solidarity with the Serbs in Croatia; some are calling for Tudjman's assassination.

A Croatian government press statement claims Yugoslav MiGs forced Croatian police helicopters out of Serbian areas. Press reports say the Serbian-dominated Yugoslav Army had deployed to Knin, but the military has denied those stories.

Croatian leader Tudjman has accused Serbia of fomenting the disturbances to bring down his government. A republic spokesman said Croatia will defend itself and restore state authority over the entire republic.

The risk of violence tomorrow is high. If federal forces and Croatian police units are on duty in the same areas, they could clash. Any fighting could easily spill over into ethnically mixed Bosnia and other regions and ignite a wider conflict. In that event federal and military authorities would have no realistic alternative to imposing martial law, despite the danger the armed forces could split along ethnic lines.

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