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CONFLICT IN THE BALKANS: THE STRATEGY; Frustrated Croats Are Openly Preparing a Major Assault on a Serbian Enclave

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ZAGREB, Croatia, July 13 -- As the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Bosnia reels from fresh attacks by rebel Serbs, the Government of Croatia is planning to open a major new front in the Balkan war.

Increasingly frustrated at the failure of diplomacy to recover the large chunk of their country that has been occupied by Serbian rebels since 1991, Croatian leaders are urgently preparing a major attack on the Serbian enclave.

Thousands of Croatian soldiers, with scores of tanks and hundreds of artillery pieces, have been moved near the enclave in recent weeks. Jet fighters, which the Croatian Air Force has obtained despite the United Nations arms embargo on former Yugoslav republics, are being readied for action.

The Croatian Serb rebels hold more than one-fourth of Croatia. Croatian troops recaptured a sliver of land, Western Slavonia, in May; now they appear to be preparing for a much larger action against the much larger Serb-held region called Krajina.

"Their last operation showed that they have the capacity for extremely smart military maneuvering," a foreign ambassador said of the Croatian Army. "Their morale is very, very high. They know what they're supposed to do, and they're prepared to go and do it."

There is no indication that the current fighting in eastern Bosnia, where Bosnian Serbs have captured the United Nations "safe area" of Srebrenica, will affect Croatia's timing.

Military planners here do not expect large numbers of Bosnian Serbs to come to the aid of Krajina if it is attacked. The Bosnian Serb army is stretched thin, holding more territory than it can effectively defend, and in any event the Krajina Serbs and the Bosnian Serbs have separate armies whose troops are committed mostly to defense of their own home regions. Nevertheless, the two forces have cooperated in the past, most notably in coordinated attacks against the Government-held enclave at Bihać, Bosnia.

More worrisome for Croatia would be the entry of the army of Serb-dominated Yugoslavia in defense of the Krajina Serbs, but many Croatian and foreign analysts say this is unlikely.

As they plan their attack, Croatian Government officials, both civilian and military, are making no effort to disguise their intentions.

"We would very much prefer to recover the occupied territory peacefully, but we are coming to the conclusion that the international community is not going to bring us a solution," Gen. Anton Tus, the chief military adviser to President Franjo Tudjman, said in an interview this week. "We have to do it ourselves. If we do nothing, we are essentially giving away part of our country and permitting the establishment of a Serb-run state on our territory."

Foreign governments, including the United States, have warned President Tudjman that an attack risks strong international condemnation, which would set back his efforts to bring Croatia closer to NATO and the European Union. But foreign criticism of his last attack was mild, and he apparently believes that the risks of inaction are greater than those of war.

"We're all pessimistic about the possibility of avoiding another round of fighting," said a Western diplomat in

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Zagreb. "It's going to be a bigger and bloodier operation than the last one, which was a rout. But Tudjman seems convinced that it's worth the gamble."

Diplomats and United Nations officials here are speculating not on whether Mr. Tudjman will order a new attack, but when it will come. Most guess that it will be sometime between the end of the tourist season and the onset of winter, probably in late August or September.

After the attack in May in which Croatia recaptured Western Slavonia, Serbian gunners fired volleys of cluster bombs into Zagreb, killing 11 civilians and wounding about 200. Milan Martić, leader of the breakaway authority that calls itself the Republic of Serbian Krajina, warned recently that he would use the same tactic if there were another attack.

"We have enough missiles to hit all important targets in Croatia," Mr. Martić said on television. "Retaliation against Croatian cities remains one of the most important aspects of our military strategy."

Despite this threat, interviews with Croats in Zagreb and elsewhere in the country suggest that public support for a new attack on the Krajina Serbs would be strong.

"Serbs will retaliate by shelling Croatian cities, including the capital," said Vera Golubic, a Zagreb accountant. "We all know that. So let's pay the price. It's better than being hostage to the Serbs for years and years."

Croatia's envoy at the United Nations office in Geneva, Miomir **Zuzul**, took a similar position in an interview broadcast on Zagreb television this week.

"We have a cancer in our body," Mr. **Zuzul** said. "When you have such a disease you cannot wait forever."

Apparently in preparation for an attack, the Croatian Army has reinforced positions near potentially vulnerable areas of the Serb-held territory. One set of positions is along the northern edge of the enclave, between Sisak and Karlovac. Another is around Canak, where the crescent-shaped occupied region is narrowest.

In addition, a combination of Croatian Army units and Bosnian Croats has taken up positions in hills and mountains overlooking Knin, where the Krajina Serbs have their headquarters.

There are about 10,000 United Nations troops in the threatened area, and any attacking force would have to overrun at least some of their positions to establish control.

The rebel Serbs have also been strengthening their forces, with substantial help from President Slobodan Milošević of Serbia.

After Croatia's victory in May, Mr. Milošević sent a senior officer from the Yugoslav Army, Gen. Milan Mrksić, to take command of the Krajina military. According to Western intelligence reports, Mr. Milošević has also sent dozens of tanks and scores of field officers to Krajina.

In an effort to bolster the Krajina infantry, Mr. Milošević's police have rounded up several thousand Serbs born in the Krajina region and sent them home, where they are being forced into the rebel army.

But Croatian and foreign analysts are convinced that Mr. Milošević would not send the Yugoslav Army to counter an attack on Krajina. Such an action would bring Serbia itself directly into the war and expose it to serious retaliation.

Croatian officers have apparently not decided the scale of their planned assault, but it will almost certainly be considerably more ambitious than their recapture of Western Slavonia.

At the Croatian Foreign Ministry, planners have prepared maps showing key roads and rail lines in Krajina, as well as the route of the region's only oil pipeline. Officials say their aim is to recover as many of these assets as possible, as well as to take at least enough territory to cut Krajina into several pieces.

Serbs, whose families have lived in parts of Croatia for centuries, rebelled against Croatian authority in early 1991, after Croatia broke away from Yugoslavia. With considerable help from the Serb-led Yugoslav Army, they established control over their parts of newly independent Croatia and turned them into the so-called Krajina Republic.

United Nations peacekeepers moved into Krajina, but after they failed to bring it back under Croatian control, the Croatian Government threatened last year to force them to leave. The Government later extended the

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mandate, but it is scheduled to expire at the end of November.

"The major factors all point in a negative direction at the moment," said a senior European diplomat in Belgrade. "We have a critical situation in Sarajevo and the other Muslim enclaves.

"The Bosnian Serbs are showing no willingness to come to the negotiating table. There is no prospect of an agreement between Yugoslavia and Croatia, or of an accord under which Yugoslavia would agree to recognize Bosnia in exchange for a lifting of economic sanctions.

"And we are facing the very real possibility of a major conflict in Croatia late this summer or early in the autumn. All this leads me to believe that things are going very badly on all major issues."

Map of Bosnia and Herzegovina showing location of Krajina Region and areas of control.

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