

The Washington Post

AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER

Sanctions on the Serbs

AS A SYMBOLIC gesture of disapproval, the European Community's sanctions on Yugoslavia—aimed chiefly at the Serbs—are well justified. Whether they will make any practical difference is open to question. In the past the EC had extended both economic aid and a wide range of trade preferences to Yugoslavia. To suspend them, as it has now done, would normally constitute tremendous pressure. But the war has already done so much damage to Yugoslavia's economy that the impact of the sanctions may well be entirely lost in the general chaos and decline.

Nor will sanctions be easy to administer. The EC is going to try to distinguish between Serbia, as the aggressor, and those other republics that are ready to accept its peace plan. While the sanctions apply to the whole country, the republics accepting the plan are to be compensated—which won't be simple. One sanction that would have real bite is an oil embargo, but Yugoslavia's oil doesn't come from the EC. It comes from the east, mainly Romania and the Soviet Union. The EC is going to the United Nations for a complete cut-off of oil to Yugoslavia, but that will require worldwide cooperation.

The EC's inability to mount a stronger peace-making effort has generated a good deal of unhappiness in Europe. It's the first serious fighting on European soil since World War II, and

so far the EC hasn't even been able to slow it down. But in truth, no outsider has much leverage. While the United States has now joined the EC in imposing sanctions, it has also expressed doubts that they will accomplish much. The Germans have been pressing for an embargo of all trade, but other EC countries resist on grounds that it would impose intolerable suffering on civilians. Germany has also wanted to recognize Slovenia and Croatia as independent countries. But recognition would only exacerbate the struggle over the Serbian-Croatian border through the many areas where both Serbs and Croats live together.

The EC has one instrument of persuasion that has proved effective in encouraging democracy and respect for human rights everywhere else in Europe. That is the promise of membership in the EC itself. But it assumes that people will respond to the prospect of economic growth. The Serbs, and to a lesser degree the Croats, are instead pursuing a kind of nationalism that is recklessly and willfully sacrificing all their country's hopes of economic progress.

The EC's plan for peace proposes a loose Yugoslav federation of essentially independent republics with guarantees for minority rights. It's an entirely reasonable idea. Unfortunately, Serbia is not being led by reasonable people.

"MA"