

US move to arm Bosnia horrifies Europe

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EUROPEAN foreign ministers seem to have accepted that the US will begin supplying Bosnian Muslims with arms, but are pressing Washington to limit the damage they believe this will cause.

As the US Congress reconvenes today after a brief summer recess, pressure is expected to mount quickly on President Bill Clinton to carry out his threat to lift the arms embargo on Bosnia. Work is expected to begin immediately on drafting a resolution and a majority in Congress is almost certain.

Sources in Washington indicated that plans were in train for the supply of arms to the Muslims. While the US might provide some weaponry, it would look to Muslim countries in the Middle East for most of the arms.

Such a prospect horrifies the Europeans — especially those with troops in Bosnia. They would move immediately to withdraw their troops, they say, risking a fresh plunge into bloody conflict. Bosnia's President, Alija Izetbegovic, accused Britain and France of blackmail over their threats to pull out. He said he would rather have supplies of weapons than the continued presence of the UN peace-keeping force.

European Union foreign ministers meeting on the German Baltic coast at the weekend discussed the work of the Contact group, intended to prevent such rows between the nations negotiating over the Balkans — Britain, France, Germany, the US and Russia.

Much of their conversation was positive, despite a Croatian grenade attack yesterday on the headquarters of the EU administrator in Mostar. They say that there is increasing evidence the Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic is serious about stopping the flow of arms to the Bosnian Serbs. The foreign ministers decided that they would offer a 135-strong team to cover the border between Bosnia and Serbia — nobody wants to call them monitors, or to talk of a military presence — to establish that it is indeed closed to non-humanitarian goods. They discussed an imminent decision to lift some sanctions against Serbia — restoring air links with Belgrade.

However, there is deep gloom over the prospects in the region if the US Congress decides to lift the arms embargo. For the White House there seems no escape from the decision, in spite of a sharp awareness of how damaging it could be for relations within Nato. Before the holidays, Mr Clinton wrote to congressional leaders saying he would give the Bosnian Serbs only until 15 October to accept a peace plan for the region or face the end of the arms ban.

It has always been an aim of the US administration to enable the Bosnians to defend themselves, and that has long been a cause of friction between the US and the Europeans, who fear what Douglas Hurd has called "a level killing field". Washington will first seek an end to the embargo at the UN Security Council. But if no agreement has been reached by the end of October, it would act unilaterally.