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Sacked UN chief defiant over Bosnia

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and Ian Traynor

THE United Nations military commander in former Yugoslavia, who has just been sacked over a row with his political bosses in New York and Zagreb, yesterday asserted that his troops' mission was being reshaped at his urging.

General Jean Cot of France, whose tenure is being cut short at the insistence of the UN secretary-general, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, said the reforms he had recommended included a swifter and stronger military response when his forces were attacked or when their mandates to escort aid and secure so-called civilian safe areas in Bosnia was threatened.

Gen Cot's forthright remarks looked likely to endear him even less to his political superiors, who are embarrassed and exasperated by his blunt comments about what he perceives as the UN failure in Bosnia.

"I have asked for numerous reforms of the United Nations structure in Yugoslavia, especially in the use of information, the capacity to analyse and reflect and the use of supporting force," Gen Cot said in Sarajevo after overseeing yesterday's replacement of the UN commander in Bosnia. "These reforms are in the process of

being made."

The British lieutenant-general, Sir Michael Rose, a former SAS chief, took over the UN Bosnian command from Lt-gen Francis Briquemont of Belgium, who is leaving in frustration with what he also sees as UN failure and hampering of the military by political meddling.

The squabbling between the political and military wings of the UN reflects a longstanding row among the Western powers over how to respond to the crisis, exemplified yesterday in Paris when the United States secretary of state, Warren Christopher, rejected French demands for a new international policy to force the Bosnian Muslims to accept a peace deal.

The office of the French president, François Mitterrand, said Mr Christopher had been told that new proposals would "very soon be put on the table".

But in Washington, President Clinton said: "The killing is a function of a political fight between three factions. Until they agree to quit doing it, it's going to continue."

Gen Cot said that his row with the UN secretary-general over air support for troops currently in Bosnia was only the tip of the iceberg.

"It is not a question of a philosophical relationship between the military and the po-

litical side," he said. "In the case of a massive attack on a safe area, or anywhere else, the only means of immediate response is the policy of close air support, on the condition that we can react immediately.

"Immediately means three minutes. That would be perfect. Half an hour would be nice, but certainly not three hours."

Observers say that although UN resolutions provide for air support in certain circumstances, it would take about five hours before the complicated chain of command could be effected under current rules.

Gen Cot made it clear he was prepared to fight over air support. "If now we have become lost preachers for our cause, we will have to start again."

On his first day in Bosnia, meanwhile, Gen Rose was involved in an embarrassing disagreement with his predecessor. He told journalists in Sarajevo that first briefings had indicated to him that the 13,000 troops at his command were sufficient to get aid convoys through to central Bosnia.

Figures from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees suggest as little as one-fifth of the aid intended for the area is reaching it.

Gen Briquemont said: "I don't know how many times I have to say that we don't have the means, both in Croatia and Bosnia." He said it was up to the members of the UN Security Council to think again about their commitment to the former Yugoslavia.

Gen Rose denied he had come to head the withdrawal of British troops. "That is not part of our intention at the moment."

As he took up his post, Bosnian and Serb forces engaged in heavy exchanges of fire close to the centre of Sarajevo.