

Europe to offer Belgrade sanctions deal for peace

FROM GEORGE BROCK IN LUXEMBOURG AND JOEL BRAND IN SARAJEVO

IN A last-minute attempt to avert thousands of deaths from cold and disease in Bosnia this winter, European Union (EU) foreign ministers agreed yesterday to offer Serbia a new peace deal while reluctantly holding in reserve the use of force to get aid through if talks fail.

The foreign ministers will meet in Geneva next Monday to offer Belgrade a gradual suspension of economic sanctions, which are slowly strangling the Serbian economy, in exchange for a peace settlement and the safe delivery of food and medicine.

Willy Claes, the Belgian foreign minister and president of the EU's council of ministers, said that even if the warring parties sanctioned this idea, the Union had agreed that force could be used against renegade groups interfering with aid deliveries.

"We will not hesitate to use force," he said. "We do not want to be responsible for a humanitarian catastrophe. All obstacles must be lifted. We hope the use of force will not be necessary."

The suggestion that sanctions might be lifted in exchange for Serbian concessions on aid movement and territory has been watered down to an offer of "gradual and conditional suspension" after strenuous protests from the United States. Russian and American observers will attend the meeting.

But neither the United Nations commanders in Bosnia nor Lord Owen, the EU peace negotiator, offered the foreign ministers any hope of improvement in the bleak and worsening prospects for the aid convoys. Even if all avail-

able aid could be moved to the isolated Bosnian towns cut off from energy supplies, food and medical care, Lord Owen said afterwards, thousands of people would probably die during the winter. Douglas Hurd, the foreign secretary, acknowledged that up to a third of aid reaching Bosnia was hijacked by militias.

UN aid convoys are set to recommence today or tomorrow following a pledge of co-operation from the three

Sarajevo: Musicians in the Bosnian capital pulled out of a televised concert at the city's airport last night because they did not believe the UN could guarantee their safety through Serb checkpoints, Hugas Reiner, their French conductor, said. The orchestra had been due to perform for French troops. (AFP)

warring sides' military commanders. However, there is little evidence to indicate that the latest agreement will amount to more than any of the scores of similar pledges.

Last week Sadako Ogata, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, brought leaders from the three sides to Geneva to draw up a high-profile agreement to allow the free passage of aid. As on so many other occasions, the representatives signed their names to whatever accord was on the table, only to have nothing change in their conduct of the war.

If anything, the UN and the UNHCR are more reluctant than ever to confront the intransigence of commanders

who obstruct aid convoys. Yesterday Médecins sans Frontières, the world's largest independent organisation for emergency medical aid, deemed the UN operation in Bosnia a "complete disaster".

"It is very clear that the United Nations does not help humanitarian organisations, does not help civilians and does not help peace," Françoise Saulnier, head of legal affairs, said in London.

Mme Saulnier said the impartiality of aid agencies had been entirely lost as a result of the UN's role in former Yugoslavia. The movement of aid, she said, was more effective without the cover of the UN Protection Force, associated with a political rather than humanitarian goal.

UN commanders on the ground remain reluctant to use force, and neither Britain nor France, whose soldiers make up the bulk of the UN's Bosnian force, want to switch to a more aggressive strategy.

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