

Germany claims 'our boat is full'

Ian Traynor in Bonn

ALARMED at the prospect of an influx of refugees from crisis-ridden Albania, Germany is moving to seal its borders against a new wave of migrants from the Balkans and stepping up the forced repatriation of Bosnians.

The interior ministers of Germany's 16 states are to hold an emergency conference tomorrow on the phased deportation of more than 300,000 Bosnians after Berlin last week began expelling former Yugoslavs and warned it would start chartering aircraft in a few weeks to dispatch hundreds to the Bosnian capital, Sarajevo.

The Bavarian authorities have been serving papers on Bosnians, warning them they will be forcibly deported if they do not leave voluntarily. Many of those affected are Muslims from Serb-held parts of Bosnia, to which they cannot return.

"They simply don't know where to go," said Judith Kumin, the head of the Bonn office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). "They're coming to us in droves, saying 'I've received my notice of deportation. I don't want the police to come and get me, so I will go. Can you tell me where I should go? Who can help me? Where will I sleep? Where will I put my children?'"

Some of the desperate Mus-

lim refugees are women with children from Srebrenica, which was seized by the Serbs in 1995 amid massacres and the summary execution of thousands of Muslim males. Others are rape victims and men tortured in Serb camps.

As a result of the Albanian chaos, Bonn has served notice that its doors are closed in the event of a refugee emergency, and that other European Union countries will have to shoulder the burden.

The foreign minister, Klaus Kinkel, said this week: "Our boat is practically full."

During the Bosnian crisis, Germany took in about 150,000 refugees — many more than the rest of Europe combined. The Albanian crisis, said Mr Kinkel, "requires the solidarity of our European partners."

According to senior German politicians, the combination of Albanian chaos and the scheduled end next year of the Nato peacekeeping mission in Bosnia is causing Bonn to revise its enthusiasm for the Schengen accord among some EU countries, which provides for freedom of movement between the participating states.

Austria is scheduled to join the Schengen club in October. But risking a row with Vienna, the Bavarian interior minister, Günther Beckstein, demanded this week that Austria's accession be postponed for years because its membership would put former Yugoslavia on the border with "Schengen Europe".

Wilfried Penner, chairman of the home affairs committee

in the German parliament's lower house, said: "All the Bosnians came here via Austria. The Albanians would come the same way."

"If Austria joins Schengen, that means we have no external border with Austria. It has to ensure that its southern and eastern borders hold, and that's not easy for Austria. The EU countries have no interest in porous borders."

Bonn has been leading the push for the Schengen accord to be incorporated into EU law at this summer's European summit in Amsterdam. But Mr Penner said Germany could be getting cold feet and may prefer a delay.

Since the beginning of the year, Germany has doubled its patrols on its eastern bor-

ders with Poland and the Czech Republic to try to minimise illegal entry.

While EU leaders again agonise over how to respond to the crisis unfolding in their Balkan backyard, there appears to be agreement on strengthening "Fortress Europe".

After deporting several Bosnians by plane, under armed guard, to Sarajevo last week, the Berlin interior minister, Jorg Schonbohm, a former army general, said he would hasten the expulsions after Easter by chartering aircraft direct to the Bosnian capital. Using scheduled flights, as occurred last week, requires changing planes in Zurich and Zagreb.

The UNHCR said such threats were being issued to

encourage Bosnians to leave. "The overwhelming majority of Bosnians, once they get the threat of deportation and the risk of the police coming to get them at the breakfast table, will leave voluntarily," said Ms Kumin.

Based on a poll of 22,000 Bosnian refugees in Germany, the UNHCR estimates that 237,000 out of 300,000 are Muslims. Almost two in three of those Muslims cannot return home as they are from the half of Bosnia held by hardline Serbs. They include some communities virtually in their entirety. For example: 13,300 Muslims from the town of Bijeljina; 13,500 from Prijedor; 8,100 from Zvornik — all towns held by Serbs.

In a confidential report last month, the German foreign

ministry concluded that "non-Serbs are still being expelled in the Republika Srpska [Serb-held Bosnia]. A return of Muslims or Croats to their places of origin in the RS is virtually impossible at present."

Nonetheless, Bavaria is ignoring the report and pushing ahead with the deportations.

In Austria, a senior Social Democrat is urging that Bosnian refugees be paid to return home, and the rising star of the far right, Jorg Haider, is calling for public contracts to be denied to building firms employing non-EU immigrants, so as to combat Austrian unemployment. The jobless rate is 4 per cent — among the lowest in the EU.

Italy declares emergency

Helena Smith in Brindisi

ITALY yesterday declared a state of emergency as panic-stricken officials sought to cope with the influx of destitute Albanians trying to flee on a flotilla of dilapidated vessels.

The emergency, which will remain in force until June 30, gives Italy powers to forcibly repatriate Albanians "deemed to be a danger to public security" while permitting genuine refugees a maximum stay of three months. The emergency also allows Rome to use a contingency fund of 61 billion lire (£22 million) earmarked for refugee assistance.

Ten thousand Albanians have so far fled to Italy, making the journey on fishing boats and old ferries.

The mayor of Brindisi, Lorenzo Maggi, said the flight had assumed "biblical proportions".

The emergency measures were announced as 289 suspected Albanian convicts were repatriated from Brindisi aboard three military helicopters on orders from the interior minister, Giorgio Napolitano.

Rome hopes the show of resolve will deter others from joining the armada heading for Italy. Italian state televi-

sion channels, which have been beamed into Europe's poorest country since the collapse of communism, are covering the issue using Albanian sub-titles.

Officials said they had unmasked the alleged criminals during processing procedures at the hundreds of hastily created Italian "hospitality centres" where the refugees are being housed. Many were said to have been serving life sentences before rampaging gangs of armed bandits emptied prisons across Albania last week.

The influx has made local authorities increasingly nervous about rising crime. The appearance of armed robbers outside Brindisi on Tuesday night was immediately attributed to the Albanians.

The government had come under heavy pressure from mayors in the impoverished Puglia region to declare the state of emergency. Many have openly urged the prime minister, Romano Prodi, to block the Albanians' access to Italy's ports.

With the tourist industry gearing up for Easter, there are growing fears that the Albanians will keep visitors away. Increasingly, the southerners moan they are having to bear the brunt of the problem in sharp contrast to Italy's much richer north.



Albanian refugees queue to disembark at the Italian port of Brindisi, after being rescued yesterday by the Italian coastguard. They are among 10,000 in flight PHOTOGRAPH: PAOLO COCCO