Remarks by the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown, at the Press Conference on transfer of 11 BIS Cases

Good afternoon. Thank you for coming to our press conference. It seems it has been some time since we had one, and my announcement today may strike some of you as being technical rather than dramatic nature. But it is a very important announcement nevertheless because it marks extremely important milestone for BiH and I want to therefore stress that the purpose of this press conference is to mark up for you that BiH yesterday has passed a significant milestone on the road to sovereign statehood. One of the attributes for statehood is to be able to try even the most serious and egregious crimes within your own domestic institutions. Up until now, BiH had not that capacity. The worst crimes committed in this country had to be tried in a foreign court – The Hague . From today BiH has the ability, formally recognised in The Hague , and is the first country in the region to have the ability to try domestic war criminals, those who committed crimes in BiH, to try them in BiH.

The capacity of Bosnia and Herzegovina to prosecute war crimes according to international standards has now been fully established through the creation of the War Crimes Chamber of the Court of BiH and the Special Department of the BiH Prosecutor's Office, and which will be inaugurated on March 9th by Carla Del Ponte and myself. Registry is already operating.

But BiH has not gone further than simply establishing the War

Crimes Chamber.

Today the BiH Government filed a reply sent to the ICTY confirming that BiH now has all the legal and institutional pre-requisites in place to handle the processing and trial of Hague indicted war criminals here in BiH. I want warmly to commend all those who played a part in this extraordinary achievement and some of them international, most of them local. This confers huge praise, it seems to me, on those who have moved so fast to get this facility established. Now, you may think that of rather technical announcement but it has very human consequence.

That means that the ICTY [who knows, maybe within a matter of days] will begin to transfer certain war crimes cases committed in BiH for processing to the War Crimes Chamber in BiH.

This also means that BiH is ready to take on its international obligations, for the first time ever, as required by the UN Security Council. That means that BiH, the first country in the region, can now be a full partner with the ICTY in trying Hague indictees under entirely domestic auspices .

This progress has been achieved in a miraculously short time. I frankly did not think it could be done so quickly.

Think back to May 2002, when we launched the ten-point plan to fight crime and corruption under the banner – "First Justice, then Jobs, through Reform".

By August that year we had established the BiH Prosecutor's Office and the Special Panels in the State Court of BiH. These now show on a daily basis – and no doubt will continue to show in the days ahead – that they are able to deal with the most serious, the most high level cases of organised crime and corruption, who many in this country thought would never be brought to trial. And I have no doubt, whatsoever, that it will continue to do so.

The State Court was officially opened in January 2003. The new Criminal Codes and Criminal Procedure Codes were established to ensure that the processing of cases before the BiH Court would take place to the highest international standards.

In January 2003 the most sensitive and ambitious element of the rule of law reform was launched when talks on processing War Crimes Prosecutions in BiH began, including the necessity to find the money, many millions of KM, to make that a reality Those talks have now succeeded. That task has now been achieved on time and in record time. BiH has the ability now to try to international standards those Hague's indictees who are sent to BiH. This establishes BiH as the first in the region with that judicial capacity.

By showing itself willing and ready to handle these cases, BiH has underlined that crimes committed on its territory *can* be tried here, should be tried here and should not be sent to a third country.

Today BiH takes a major step forward towards full sovereign statehood as the first country in the region entrusted with trying Hague war criminals domestically.

From today those who committed war crimes in BiH can be tried in BiH. And that means that today justice and the rule of law in BiH takes a major step forward. Thank you.