

Seize the Day

There is a real opportunity to reach an agreement on police reform and thereby to secure a Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the European Union, the High Representative and EU Special Representative, Christian Schwarz-Schilling, wrote in his weekly newspaper column, stressing that the opportunity must not be missed.

"The seven parties that will form the new Council of Ministers today have committed themselves to a programme placing Bosnia and Herzegovina's European integration at the top of the agenda," he wrote in an article that appeared in *Dnevni avaz*, *Nezavisne novine* and *Večernji list* today. "The very first point in their January platform is a commitment to reach an agreement on police reform. Now is the time to deliver on this promise."

The three EU principles – that all legislative and budgetary competencies for all police matters must be vested at the state level; that there can be no political interference with operational policing; and that functional local police areas must be determined by technical policing criteria – are an integral part of the October 2005 Agreement, endorsed by the state parliament and the parliaments of the two entities.

Since then, the principles have been developed by the Police Reform Directorate into a technical report that has been forwarded to the Council of Ministers. The Directorate's report has now been on the table for more than a month, with the result that all sides have had the time to review and consider its contents. Given the discussions over the past three years, the issues and possible solutions are already well known.

In order to keep to the commitments made in the October 2005 Political Agreement, entity and state governments and parliaments should have adopted an implementation plan no later than 2 March. This deadline will likely be missed. But as Political Directors of the Peace Implementation Council made clear in December, an agreement must be in place before the end of March.

"If that does not happen, the signing of a Stabilisation and Association Agreement will be delayed significantly, possibly until 2008," Mr Schwarz-Schilling wrote. "Political leaders should consider carefully whether they can afford to pass up this opportunity. Opinion-formers, citizens and the media, should also monitor carefully how leaders perform and whether they deliver on their commitments."

"The Directorate's report is the result of many months of work and intensive deliberations among police experts. It is an excellent basis for moving forward and it provides for solutions that are acceptable to all, the High Representative and EU Special Representative wrote. "If necessary, my Office and other international partners are prepared to lend support to political talks."

Mr Schwarz-Schilling also highlighted the many incentives to achieving agreement. "Police reform is about more than paving the way to an SAA and anchoring Bosnia and Herzegovina in Europe; it is, above all, about making Bosnia and Herzegovina a safer and better place to live," he wrote.

"The sooner police reform is agreed and implemented, the sooner Bosnia and Herzegovina sets off on its journey to the European Union and the sooner this country's authorities will be able to tackle crime effectively," Mr Schwarz-Schilling concluded. "I expect the politicians of this country, in particular members of the new government and political party leaders, now to live up to their responsibilities."

The text of the High Representative/EU Special Representative's weekly column can be accessed at www.ohr.int and www.eusrbih.org.