Schwarz-Schilling: History Is on the Side of Those Who Come Home

The High Representative and EU Special Representative, Christian Schwarz-Schilling, today told returnees in Drvar that mechanisms developed to help particular groups of returnees could and would be transplanted elsewhere for the benefit of all and that history was on their side.

In a wide-ranging speech on return and reconciliation at the Drvar Municipal Assembly, the High Representative and EU Special Representative, assessed progress in the field of returns; highlighted the initiative he is making in relation to improving conditions in Srebrenica; and contrasted the conditions in Drvar today to those when he first visiting the municipality almost exactly one decade ago.

Mr Schwarz-Schilling said that a vast amount of effort had gone into returns during the past 12 years and much progress had been made. He made clear, however, that he did not believe sufficient progress had been made to make the process self-sustaining and that further efforts were therefore required.

The High Representative and EU Special Representative told his audience that Srebrenica was a special case because genocide had been committed there. “But the mechanisms being developed and set in place to help returnees in Srebrenica can also be applied here in Drvar and elsewhere inBosnia and Herzegovina ,” he said.

Mr Schwarz-Schilling also outlined what he was planning to do for returnees in Srebrenica.

“In the coming week, my Office is bringing together State, Entity and municipal agencies and their international partners in order to agree on the most effective ways of eliminating, for example, bureaucratic obstacles to return such as difficulties in accessing health and social services,” he said. “We are also looking at programmes that can help attract investment to the community in order to create desperately needed jobs.”

The High Representative and EU Special Representative drew attention to the importance of ongoing economic assistance to Srebrenica and the returns process in general. “Economic assistance, in Srebrenica and anywhere else in Bosnia and Herzegovina for that matter is an indispensable pillar of sustainable return. It is not a palliative but a practical prerequisite for communities to live in dignity,” he said.

Mr Schwarz-Schilling pointed out that when he first visited Drvar as International Mediator – ten years ago next week – the circumstances were very different and he was not welcome at the Municipal Assembly.

“The Mayor of Drvar at that time flatly refused even to discuss returns. He said it was not within his competency. I therefore held talks with his deputy, though he was hardly more accommodating,” the High Representative and EU Special Representative said.

“I argued that all citizens had an inalienable right to return to their homes. However, this was a principle that both the mayor and his deputy did not accept. The talks were fruitless,” Mr Schwarz-Schilling told the audience, pointing out that 22 homes in the centre of the town, belonging to families that had been displaced, were deliberately set ablaze and burned down, immediately after his visit.

“This was a very unpromising beginning,” Mr Schwarz-Schilling continued. “Yet return to Drvar did take place. History was on

the side of those who came home and those who accepted them when they came home.”

The High Representative and EU Special Representative spoke of the physical dangers that returnees had endured in Drvar and mentioned specifically the assault on Mile Marceta, the municipality’s former mayor, who was present in the audience.

“It takes a long time to change hearts and minds,” Mr Schwarz-Schilling continued. “But the process that began in 1997 – a process in which more and more citizens have been able to accept the right of return and embrace reconciliation – has continued.

“It will not be complete until all of the citizens of this community are fully enfranchised economically, socially and politically. The crimes of the past continue to exercise a damaging influence on the present – in terms of real and perceived prejudice, in terms of suspicion and exclusion.

“We have to face this fact in order to ensure that the momentum that was created in the high watermark of return, several years ago, is not lost,” the High Representative and EU Special Representative said, pointing out that Drvar is one community that shows just how much can be done, no matter how unpromising the initial circumstances.