



Weekly column by Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH and Rear Admiral Hans-Jochen Witthauer, Commander of EUFOR

“Maintaining Security and Stability”

We are writing this article together because of our firm commitment to the wellbeing and security of this country. Security and prosperity are inter-linked and it is important that the outside world understands the progress that has been made in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Even now, more than a decade after the end of the war, first-time visitors to Sarajevo and other cities in Bosnia and Herzegovina often express surprise at the absence of uniformed soldiers on the streets, whether local or international; newcomers are likewise pleasantly surprised by how relaxed and normal life in this country appears.

The fact is that the normality of everyday life in Bosnia and Herzegovina is one of the great achievements of the peace process; it stands as a testament to how far this country has come in recent years.

As a result of improvements in the security situation, EUFOR has been able to assume a discreet and inconspicuous posture. At present, the European Union has some 6,000 troops in Bosnia and Herzegovina helping to maintain a secure and stable environment. Although EUFOR is the European Union's largest peacekeeping mission, today's troop strength is only one tenth of that of the NATO-led Implementation Force deployed almost exactly 11 years ago.

Successive reductions over the years in the number of peacekeepers have always been based on a thorough assessment of the security situation, here and in the wider region. And following the European Union's latest review, the number of international troops in Bosnia and Herzegovina is set to decline again in the spring.

When they met earlier this month, EU foreign ministers decided in principle to reduce the number of troops in Bosnia and Herzegovina to about 2,500; and planning for this reduction is already underway. A definitive decision on implementing the reduction is scheduled for the end of February. As on previous occasions, this decision will be based on a thorough assessment of the security situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region. The European Union will not put this country's hard-won security at risk.

The planned reduction should not be interpreted as a lessening of the European Union's commitment to Bosnia and Herzegovina. Rather, it should be viewed as recognition of the huge progress that this country has made in strengthening its own security structures. This has ensured that the citizens of this country no longer live in fear that the nightmare of the early 1990s will be repeated.

By the same token, the international community has poured military and diplomatic resources into rebuilding Bosnia and Herzegovina over the past 11 years, as well as allocating billions of Euros in humanitarian and reconstruction aid and commercial investments. This too is not about to be put at risk.

The European Union is currently reinforcing its civilian presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina to assist the country on its road to full European integration. It is strengthening the role of the EU Special Representative in anticipation of the closure of the Office of the High Representative at the end of June. The EUSR will help coordinate the activities of the various European and other international agencies and institutions present here. Moreover, critically, EUFOR will remain in this country as long as an international military presence is required.

EUFOR will be smaller next year, but it will retain the same robust peace-enforcement mandate under Chapter VII of the UN Charter and the Dayton Agreement. A multinational manoeuvre battalion will be based in Sarajevo and liaison and observation teams will be dispersed throughout the country. In this way, EUFOR will be capable of dealing with or deterring any possible challenge to Bosnia and Herzegovina's peace and provide support to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague, including the arrest of war-crimes suspects.

If needed, EUFOR would also be able to call on immediate reinforcements in the form of over-the-horizon troops, the same kind of forces that reinforced NATO's Kosovo Force in March 2004. Moreover, EUFOR will maintain for some time the capacity to reverse the force reduction and to re-establish a more heavyweight presence should that appear necessary.

Such worst-case contingency planning is both prudent and standard procedure. No one expects it will have to be implemented. Instead, we hope and expect the security situation to continue to improve to the point that it is self-sustaining. EUFOR, meantime, will maintain its discreet but reassuring presence as Bosnia and Herzegovina continues on its path towards full European integration. And visitors will continue to marvel at how normal and peaceable life here has become.

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