

Remarks by the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown at the Opening of an Exhibition on the History of Dialogue

*The National Museum,
Tuesday, 1 February 2004*

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me start by dispelling a myth.

If you look beyond Bosnia and Herzegovina's recent past and examine the historical record as a whole, you will see that what distinguishes this country is tolerance and peace among its peoples, not conflict. Tolerance and peace have been the norm; conflict has been the aberration.

The truth is that Bosnia and Herzegovina has a long and remarkable tradition – only occasionally broken – of bringing disparate cultures together, to create that most elusive of things, a diverse and dynamic yet stable society.

One of the tragedies of the war was the loss of this country's reputation for maintaining – not always easily but for a long time successfully – communal and cultural harmony.

Notice that I use the word "reputation".

Because the *tradition* itself was not destroyed by the war – though there were many who sought to destroy it – and today this tradition is reasserting itself.

It is the tradition of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a place where

cultures *meet*; the tradition of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a place where cultures *enrich* one another; the tradition of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a place where models of communities coexisting – creatively and fruitfully – have been successfully developed at different levels, in civic life, in political life, in social life, in sport and entertainment and literature and the arts.

The American opera singer Marian Anderson, one of the most charismatic voices in the struggle against racism in the 20th century, once noted that, “You lose a lot of time hating people.”

If you *do* choose to hate, you *do* lose a lot of time, and a lot more besides.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina I have been privileged again and again to witness that life-affirming *refusal* to hate that is the bedrock of this country’s tradition – a tradition that existed before the war and survived the war and will see us through present and future difficulties.

The fact is – the *miracle* is – that, not everywhere but in the main, the ethnic cleansers failed. Those driven out have returned – to Srebrenica, to Drvar, to Bugojno, to Kosarac, and to villages and towns throughout the country.

Has the tradition we are speaking about made life here tolerable?

It has done much more than that. It has made life in Bosnia and Herzegovina infinitely *richer*.

You have lessons to teach the rest of us in Europe. Positive lessons. Unique lessons. I want to make it clear tonight that we in the rest of Europe are once again beginning to understand that.

The exhibition being opened this evening evolved from the

Council of Europe's Intercultural Dialogue and Conflict Prevention project. It comes as no surprise at all that Sarajevo was the first city to be designated under this project as an "Intercultural Town". It is right that this is so. The exhibition is just one of many activities that have been launched in the course of the last year on the Intercultural Town theme.

I would like to commend the Council of Europe and the National Museum, the Banja Luka and Sarajevo Academies of Fine Art, and the Sarajevo Architectural faculty for the creative energy they have brought to this project.

They have been, and continue to be, engaged in the exploration and promotion of an infinitely rewarding subject – Bosnia and Herzegovina's tradition of dialogue and tolerance.

It is a tradition of recognizing differences – and celebrating them rather than being intimidated by them. It's a tradition of mastering cultural incompatibilities with creativity and humour and discipline and restraint.

This is truly Bosnia and Herzegovina's gift to the rest of the continent.

This country is getting its reputation back – it's rightful reputation as a place where people know how to live with one another in dignity and mutual respect. That's what this exhibition rightfully celebrates.

I wish it well – and I wish that those who visit it will better understand what the best of Bosnia and Herzegovina can teach the world.

Thank you