High Representative's Response to Editorial Commentary in Washington Times

Sir,

Jeffrey T. Kuhner's commentary (*Redrawing Bosnian Borders*, 1 October 2003) argues that the International Community and its partners in Bosnia and Herzegovina have failed to set this country on the road to economic and political recovery.

This is not true.

The people of Bosnia and Herzegovina have come a long way towards re-establishing their distinctive and inclusive, multicultural tradition; all of the country's communities are, by law, represented at every level of the governmental structure agreed at Dayton; and the economy is now growing at a steady five percent annually.

This is absolutely not the "basket case" that Mr Kuhner has been told about.

The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina was particularly bloody because, of all the republics of former Yugoslavia, it was the most integrated – Croats, Muslims and Serbs shared villages and towns, and the number of "mixed" marriages was higher than in any of the other republics. Nationalists tried to destroy this culture of tolerance by dividing the country along confessional lines. That was what produced those dreadful scenes of terrified civilians being evicted from their homes by paramilitary thugs.

Mr Kuhner has been told that this exercise should be repeated,

but this time with the assistance of the US government. “The Bosnian Serbs should be allowed to form a state with Serbia,” he writes. “The Croat territories – especially those centered around their stronghold of Mostar in Western Herzegovina – should be incorporated into Croatia. The Bosnian Muslims would have their own state, with Sarajevo as the capital.”

What will happen to those who find themselves on the wrong side of this division? Who will police the imposition of apartheid and escort terrified civilians from their homes? US troops?

Mr Kuhner argues that “Washington needs to realize that synthetic states such as Bosnia-Herzegovina are destined to fail.” What about synthetic states such as the US? Or the United Kingdom? Or Belgium? He insists that Washington must realize that Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a Balkan Switzerland. That is exactly what it is trying to become. It is unhelpful for commentators such as Mr Kuhner to suggest that where the people of Switzerland have succeeded, the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina are bound to fail.

Mr Kuhner is correct when he notes that the International Community is committed to keeping Bosnia and Herzegovina’s borders intact, but he has been told that “the reality on the ground” militates against this. He cites as evidence of “Islamic fundamentalism” in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a Christmas-Eve attack on a Croat family by a young unemployed Muslim who had been under psychiatric treatment. Mindless killings by unstable individuals are not exclusive to this country. This attack does not support the thesis that “Islamic fundamentalism” is endemic in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In this respect it should be borne in mind that the individuals involved in the 9/11 atrocity were variously traced to Spain, France, Germany, Britain and the US, none of which are generally viewed as hotbeds of “Islamic fundamentalism”.

After 9/11 the Sarajevo authorities took important steps to

ensure that BiH could not in any way be used as a platform for terrorist attacks of any sort, in Europe or elsewhere. This country is not a terrorist base nor will it become one.

Catholics worship in Sarajevo, as they worship throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina, unmolested. So do Orthodox Christians, Muslims and Jews. It simply isn't true to say that wearing a crucifix invites assault.

Mr Kuhner says that the Croats of Bosnia and Herzegovina "are on the front-lines in the war against Islamic terrorism in the Balkans". Yet, those of us who live in the Balkans have yet to see any evidence of "Islamic terrorism".

Bosnia and Herzegovina needs international investment. The US role is vital. That is how, with our help, the Bosnian authorities are going to reduce unemployment, squeeze out poverty and get the annual growth figures into double digits. This is the kind of "alliance" with the US that most people in Bosnia and Herzegovina – Croats, Serbs, Muslims and others – would like to foster.

Mr Kuhner has been told by a "high-ranking Bosnian Croat government official" that "we can act as the eyes and ears for the West in the Balkans and monitor the activities of Al Qaeda in Bosnia." The implication appears to be that the Croats of Bosnia and Herzegovina are especially privy to the workings of Al Quaeda, which is certainly an arresting idea and equally certainly a silly one. Or is the implication that the Muslim community of Bosnia and Herzegovina are en masse involved with Al Quaeda? That is the kind of prejudice honourably and decisively addressed in the United States in the days after 9/11 by President George W Bush, when he articulated the timeless values of confessional tolerance upon which the US is built.

Bosnia and Herzegovina is not a "a strategic bulwark against Islamic expansionism". It is a small and diverse European

democracy struggling to achieve economic lift-off. I suggest your journalist come and see this for himself, rather than retailing insulting and inaccurate prejudices from afar.

Yours faithfully,

Paddy Ashdown,
High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina