# Ashdown strives to atone for the West’s sins over Bosnia

**The former Lib Dem leader is helping a people scarred by years of war**

PADDY ASHDOWN inhales deeply on his cigarette as Elmir tells his tragic story. The rest of the room sits in silence.

Hands clasped together, body slowly rocking, the young man describes how his family was slaughtered, how he cannot return home because the blood can never be washed away, how his life has been destroyed and he has been left with nothing.

Lord Ashdown of Norton-sub-Hamdon listens, eyes concentrating, exposing the wrinkles that have come with age and the heavy responsibility he now bears. He is listening to a Bosnian story that could be repeated a thousand times.

We are in a semi-derelict building in a semi-derelict town in northern Bosnia. It is 9pm, it is cold and the most powerful man in Bosnia is spending the night in a refugee transit centre. The building’s electricity supply is as unreliable as the water supply.

Food comes when it comes. To walk into the bathroom is to wade through shallow water. Lord Ashdown is here to listen to the problems of Bosnia’s poorest.

Seven months ago the former leader of the Liberal Democrats and newly created peer of the realm decided to abandon the rich retirement pastures of Westminster. Instead he packed his bags and headed for Bosnia.

Appointed as the international community’s chief envoy to the country, his job was to raise Bosnia from the ashes and bring it closer to the European fold. It would have been easier to

take the Liberal Democratic Party into power.

“I am here because I think it was a terrible sin of the West to allow those four years of war,” he said.

“When history comes to judge the siege of Sarajevo, which went on longer than the siege of Stalingrad, they’ll judge us very hard indeed for simply standing by and doing nothing. We have a moral responsibility here and I feel I would like to help.”

He is now in a position to do so. Vested with far-reaching powers under the Dayton Peace Accords, which ended the war seven years ago, he can make laws, sack ministers and control the country’s purse strings. And he is not shy.

Already he has dismissed judges and mayors, a finance minister and even the head of the intelligence service. The British Empire would have been proud.

But he has a long way to go. The economy is on its knees and the political system is so corrupt that it would embarrass a banana republic.

Hanging over all is the continued freedom of the Bosnian Serb wartime leaders Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, who are wanted by the United Nations war crimes tribunal in The Hague.

My day with Bosnia’s Lord High Protector had begun 14 hours earlier with his daily walk to work. From his modest residence halfway up one of Sarajevo’s many hills, we made our way through the city’s main market, Lord Ashdown greeting the stallholders in the Bosnian language that he has been studying in his spare time.

Sometimes they understand. Sometimes they do not. At least he tries.

“Foreigners have such a wrong impression about the place. The war is long, long over and although we are dealing with some quite difficult people at times, for the average person

walking the streets, this is safer than any of the big cities in the UK.”

The former Royal Marine, who turns 62 in February, keeps up a formidable pace. The 25-minute walk to work is followed by a quick march up five flights of stairs to his office. A string of businesslike meetings follows and then we are off to Sarajevo’s main Nato base for a helicopter to the town of Bihac in the North West, close to the Croatian border. His wife, Jane, who has also moved to Sarajevo, accompanies us.

We touch down in a farmer’s field – the closest thing to a landing pad in this part of the country. Like so many other Bosnian towns, Bihac is desperate for attention or, more accurately, investment.

In a convoy of cars we head for the local high school where Lord Ashdown wants to meet the teachers and see education at the sharp end.

There is spontaneous applause from the students as he strides in. “Ashdown is cool,” one of them says. “He is a good man,” another says. “He wants to do something for us, for Bosnia. He wants to help us.” They are not the first in Bosnia to have more faith in Paddy Ashdown than in their own politicians.

There are more visits and meetings until finally, in the evening, we arrive at the refugee transit centre a few miles outside Bihac. It is the last stop of the day and the Ashdowns will be spending the night in the rundown building, reminiscent of a Victorian workhouse without the frills. Lord Ashdown is here, he says, to listen to the problems of the “flotsam and jetsam of Bosnian society, of those washed up by war and conflict”.

After changing into jeans and jumper he spends three hours talking to the residents, visiting each of their pathetic little rooms. To each one he says that he can do very little. But then quietly, later, he has a word with his assistant,

telling her to take their names and do what she can.

It is the early hours and time for a coffee and one last cigarette before bed. I ask him what is going through his mind.

“I like this country. I love this country. It’s under my skin,” he says. “But I have one great fear. That the international community will lose patience with Bosnia and not finish the job it has started. Enormous progress has been made but the resources must keep on coming to finish the job.”