

Article by the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown: "Progress put in peril by UN Diplomats"

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina – As I write, intensive diplomacy is underway at the United Nations and in half a dozen capitals on either side of the Atlantic, aimed at averting a critical disruption of the international community's peacekeeping operation in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The source of the problem lies not in Bosnia but in New York. Following a dispute between the United States and its partners on the Security Council, over whether or not US personnel stationed overseas should come under the jurisdiction of the newly-established International Criminal Court, Washington has vetoed the Security Council's extension of its mandate to the UN Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina.

It is above my pay grade to untangle the high politics of transatlantic relationships. But it *is* my job to seek the best for Bosnia and Herzegovina. Unless the dispute is resolved by the end of today, the UN mission will have to pack its bags and make an unseemly withdrawal from BiH.

The people of BiH might have to pay a high price for that. So might people in the rest of Europe, and indeed in the United States.

A stable Bosnia contributes to the stability of Europe.

Bosnia and Herzegovina still needs peacekeepers not because it is a hopeless case, but for the very opposite reason. Six years on from the worst bloodletting in Europe since World War Two, the country is showing unmistakable signs of sustainable

recovery. It is crucial that international support for this recovery not be withdrawn. It would be unconscionable if such support were withdrawn because BiH has been made a pawn in a diplomatic game.

The hard work of the last six years by the international community – with the United States in the lead – and the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina themselves, is at last bearing fruit.

This could be fundamentally compromised by an abrupt UN withdrawal.

BiH has made huge progress in its path towards normal democracy. But much still has to be done. Effective measures have been taken by the domestic authorities to ensure that this country cannot under any circumstances be used as a base for international terrorism. Yet, smuggling and people trafficking remain a major problem.

Work has begun on implementing a nationwide education syllabus that turns schools into places of reconciliation rather than nationalist indoctrination. There is a stable currency, almost no inflation and a profitable commercial banking system. Gross domestic product in 2000 and 2001 grew by around 5 percent, despite a decline in aid flows. Yet the economy remains fragile, and more work must be done to eradicate the nationalist nostrums that wrought havoc a decade ago.

This year a comprehensive state of the art system of issuing passports and identity cards has been introduced, making BiH documents as good as any in Europe, though organised crime continues to exercise an unhealthy influence over large tracts of society.

When I took up my responsibilities for peace implementation in BiH, at the end of May, I identified my priorities as “first justice, then jobs, through reform.”

We are in the midst of a comprehensive overhaul of the courts, and we are carrying out a root and branch reform of the police forces. Police reform is the responsibility of the International Police Task Force, which is supervised by the UN Mission. Early withdrawal of the United Nations mission would rush the transition from the International Police Task Force to the European Union police mission, scheduled for the end of this year, and make it much harder to achieve the next stage in our work with the police here: tackling organized crime.

My goal in BiH is to wind down the interventionist peace-building process of the postwar years, with its major North Atlantic Treaty Organization military component, and to help bring about a more normal presence based on extensive engagement by the European Union and private investors. In a few years' time there will be no more need for soldiers and international bureaucrats like me. Instead, I hope Sarajevo will be full of bankers and businessmen.

Failure by the Security Council to extend the mandate of the UN mission until January 1 next year would be a blow to the process of normalisation, but probably not a catastrophic one. US troops will remain part of NATO's military stabilisation force. The point is that the aims of the international community's policy – a stable BiH that offers security and prosperity to its citizens and can take its place as a responsible and productive member of the broader family of states – will take longer to achieve.

Success will come – enough has now been done to guarantee that – but it will come more slowly, and it will cost more.

For the sake of the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and for the sake of the international community, the diplomats must produce a sensible solution to the ICC dispute – one that allows the UN mission in BiH to continue its valuable work.

Paddy Ashdown, former head of the Liberal Democrat party in

Britain, is high representative of the international community in Bosnia and responsible for implementation of the Dayton peace accords.