

High Representative addresses OSCE Permanent Council

The High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, today addressed the 55-nation OSCE Permanent Council in Vienna. He briefed the Council on recent political developments in Bosnia and Herzegovina and gave an overview of the three years of his mandate, highlighting the major achievements and the overall progress sustained in the country.

The High Representative said that the tremendous progress made by Bosnia and Herzegovina during this three-year period "heralds the start – not the end – of positive change". Major breakthroughs have been achieved and important processes have been brought on track in refugee return, the building of state institutions, economic reform, human rights and in other fields.

He stressed the OSCE's contribution to the achievements, "which was one of the first organisations to see the importance of a co-ordinated approach," adding: "I cannot overstate how lucky I have been to have had such an able, energetic and wise partner in implementing the Dayton Accords."

In his address, the High Representative said the latest and most compelling example of systemic progress was the reform of the Entity Constitutions. The Mrakovica-Sarajevo Agreement signed by the ruling political parties in Bosnia and Herzegovina represents the ultimate proof that the country has entered a new era, he said. The changes in the Constitutions will ensure the rights of Bosniacs, Croats, Serbs and Others throughout the territory of their country, and this consensus was reached by BiH's leaders themselves.

Recent years have also produced a breakthrough in refugee return. The number of so-called minority returns leapt to 67,000 in 2000, increasing by another 36 percent to 92,000 in 2001. If the current rate of refugee return continues, Annex 7 could be implemented in its entirety within four years, the High Representative said. However, he expressed concern about the lack of financial and material assistance provided to returnees to rebuild their homes. He called upon the governments of the OSCE member countries to assist the return process. "We cannot allow – when return is politically possible and really happening – returns to fail due to a lack of assistance," the High Representative said.

He recalled that six and a half years after Dayton, Bosnia and Herzegovina now has the attributes of a proper state. The State Government – the Council of Ministers – has grown from three to six ministries. The State Border Service, the Court of BiH, and regulatory agencies in strategic sectors of the economy have all been established. Moreover, the new government led by the "Alliance for Change" has forged a new relationship with the International Community based on partnership and mutual respect as an interim stage on the way to full ownership.

In 2002, after six rounds of elections arranged and supervised by the OSCE, Bosnia and Herzegovina will for the first time organise its own elections. This represents "a milestone demonstrating BiH's growing statehood and level of democratisation", the High Representative said.

However, in order for democracy and the rule of law to function, determined and robust steps must be taken so as to complete the judicial reform process, in which the OSCE will play a crucial role. The High Representative announced that over the next two years, the positions of judges and prosecutors will come up for reappointment; the appointment process will be depoliticised; the court system will be restructured and new criminal and criminal and civil procedure codes will be put in place. Combined with a reformed police and a new depoliticised and merit-based civil service, this will create a foundation for the rule of law to be consolidated and for corruption to be curtailed.

During a 90-minute discussion that followed his presentation, the OSCE ambassadors thanked the High Representative for his commitment and efforts, which have resulted in the dramatic improvement of the conditions in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Spain, on behalf of the European Union and the associated countries, said "that the balance he has struck between decisive intervention and encouraging BiH ownership and responsibility has made an important contribution to reaching our common goals" and termed the Mrakovica-Sarajevo Agreement as "a historic compromise."

The Canadian ambassador said the High Representative can take "personal pride" for the Agreement, as well as the increase in refugee return and adoption of the Election Law by the domestic authorities. Bosnia and

Herzegovina also thanked the High Representative for his “invaluable contribution to peace implementation” and said during his tenure, Bosnia and Herzegovina turned from an object of international politics to a subject in international politics. Armenia stressed that there are important lessons to be learnt from the international engagement in BiH, which should be studied for future interventions.