

High Representative holds talks with British Foreign Secretary

During his visit to London, the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, yesterday met with the British Foreign Secretary, Jack Straw, and other top Foreign Office and British parliamentary officials, briefing them on the main political and social issues facing Bosnia and Herzegovina in the coming months.

In the course of his meetings, the High Representative focused on the constitutional reform process, soon to be undertaken by both Entity Parliaments in order to ensure the full representation and protection of BiH's constituent peoples and citizens in both Entities. The High Representative stressed the need for compromise and ownership of the process by BiH's political leadership, and he welcomed the Mrakovica and Sarajevo meetings, at which BiH's main political parties have started to seek solutions to the issues raised by the Constitutional Court's decision. The High Representative noted that the amendments to the Entity Constitutions must be agreed and adopted by approximately mid-March in order to allow for the timely amendment of the Election Law, so that all the elections due in October can be held under this Law.

During the talks, BiH's impending accession to the Council of Europe and the continuing process of strengthening of State institutions were recognised as positive developments, though it was stressed that BiH will now have to fulfill the CoE's post-accession criteria.

The High Representative also raised the question of BiH State

and Entity co-operation with the Hague tribunal and reiterated the need for the apprehension of indicted war criminals Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic. He said this will allow BiH and in particular the RS to close symbolically a dark chapter of the recent past, and he noted that it is a precondition for reconciliation and faster refugee return. All his interlocutors fully agreed with this assessment and emphasised that the place of Karadzic and Mladic is behind bars at the Tribunal's detention facility.

The High Representative received positive feedback for his proposals on streamlining the International Community's presence in BiH, in particular the introduction of a system of inter-agency taskforces for greater co-ordination, and the new cabinet system through which the representatives of the key international agencies will meet regularly under the chairmanship of the High Representative to coordinate policy. The progress achieved in refugee return and the ever-increasing rate of property law implementation were also noted with satisfaction.

The Foreign Secretary thanked the High Representative for the overview he had provided, stressing the High Representative had the full support of the British Foreign Office in his efforts.

The High Representative's interlocutors included Dennis McShane, Parliamentary Undersecretary of State at the Foreign Office, Lord Grenfell, Chairman of the Economics and Financial Subcommittee of the House of Lords Select Committee on the European Union, Lt. General Sir Michael Willcocks, Black Rod of the House of Lords, and Chris Treach, Senior Political Advisor to the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The High Representative also met with Alexander, Crown Prince of Yugoslavia, who was visiting the House of Lords at the same time.