

The High Representative appeals for urgent passage of State-level De-mining Legislation

The High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, expects the State-level Law on De-mining to be placed on the agenda for a second reading at the next session of the BiH House of Representatives, planned for the 12th of this month, and it's urgent adoption thereafter.

Some five hundred people have been killed and three times that number have been injured in mine accidents in Bosnia and Herzegovina since 1995. The High Representative is of the firm opinion that political interests must take second place to an urgent and systematic programme of removing mines. This issue must not be delayed any longer; it must not be used as a political football. Mines are the most dangerous legacy of the war. They are still killing and maiming.

The proposed State-level legislation will, for the first time, put de-mining in BiH under a formal legal framework, creating the necessary government structure to administer, manage and control de-mining activities in BiH under the Ministry of Civil Affairs and Communication's De-mining Commission and BHMAL (BiH Mine Action Centre). This legislation will strengthen the De-mining Commission, creating a single focal point that will represent BiH de-mining operations in its relations with the International Community. The Law will authorise BHMAL to implement the same standards for de-mining across BiH, and for the first time offer protection to de-miners by defining their responsibilities and rights in line

with international standards. Furthermore the law will reduce the top-heavy administrative structure which has plagued de-mining efforts in BiH.

International donors, who have to date supported de-mining in BiH want evidence that BiH is taking this problem seriously. The donors have asked for greater awareness of the de-mining issue at the highest levels of the BiH administration, for Entity and State budgets to start funding MAC employees in 2002, for a State-wide de-mining programme, and for a State-level De-mining Law. The deadline for these developments is early March this year, when the De-mining Board of Donors meets to pledge funds for de-mining activities in the future. The donors have clearly indicated that they will not be so forthcoming if these requirements are not met.

Ridding BiH of mines is crucial to all aspects of civilian life. Return, economic development and investment to a great extent depend on skilled teams removing this deadly threat. The High Representative is determined that passage of this law will not be jeopardised by the procedural foot-dragging which has become a standard tactic of Serb representatives in the State-level institutions. The well-being of skilled and brave de-miners depends on this legislation. As tragic events have shown in the last few days, the lives of young children depend on this legislation too.