Interview: High Representative in BiH, Wolfgang Petritsch:”Bosnia envoy sees new will to grab Karadzic”

The top international official charged with bringing lasting peace to Bosnia said on Thursday he detected a new determination among major powers to bring Serb wartime leader Radovan Karadzic to justice. High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch also urged local leaders to build on the Dayton agreement which ended the 1992-95 war and make greater efforts to turn Bosnia into a viable state rather than an international protectorate.

Petritsch said in an interview with Reuters that the arrest of Karadzic, charged with genocide by the United Nations war crimes tribunal in The Hague, was a key part of the process of drawing a line under the war and moving towards normality.

“The longer I’m here, the more I’m convinced – unless Karadzic ends up in The Hague, people will not be able to turn the page on the war and look towards the future,” Petritsch said. “Eventual reconciliation will be impossible.”

Karadzic and his wartime military commander Ratko Mladic have been indicted by the tribunal for the 1995 mass killing of up to 8,000 Muslim men and boys and for the three-and-a-half year siege of Sarajevo which killed around 12,000 people.

Karadzic is widely believed to be hiding in mountainous eastern Bosnia close to the border with the Yugoslav republic of Montenegro while Western and local sources have said Mladic

is in Belgrade under the protection of the Yugoslav army.

Western leaders have often stressed the importance of their arrest but Petritsch, who visited NATO's decision-making North Atlantic Council last week, indicated there was now a stronger will to make it happen.

Diplomats say any operation to arrest Karadzic would have to be carried out by NATO, which commands and dominates an 18,000-strong peacekeeping force in Bosnia.

"It's too sensitive to go into details but I can assure you that there is a renewed resolve on the part of the international community to bring this issue to an end," Petritsch said.

DAYTON DEFENDED

Petritsch, an Austrian diplomat who has been the international community's high representative in Sarajevo since 1999, said the Dayton deal had provided a good foundation for postwar Bosnia and local leaders had to build on it.

Some analysts contend that Dayton itself is at the root of the West's problems in making Bosnia a viable state.

They argue the peace pact, named after the U.S. Air Force base in Ohio where it was negotiated, gives too much power to the Balkan state's highly autonomous entities – the Serb Republic and a federation made up largely of Muslims and Croats.

But Petritsch cited a decision last year by Bosnia's Constitutional Court, which ruled the entities had to treat all peoples equally, as proof institutions created by Dayton could push the country forward towards modern European standards.

"Dayton is a far more intelligent model than one would maybe, in a superficial way, see it," he said.

The court ruling effectively means the entities should no longer be seen as ethnically-based. In practice, it would mean more rights and positions of authority for Serbs in the federation and for Muslims and Croats in the Serb Republic.

“The two entity governments will become truly multi-ethnic,” Petritsch said. “This will be an enormous boost for the ultimate goal… of Dayton, and that is the re-establishment of the multi-ethnic Bosnia-Herzegovina.”

Local leaders have long been debating how to change the constitutions of the two entities to comply with the court’s decision. Some analysts believe Petritsch will finally have to use his sweeping powers to impose a solution.

Petritsch acknowledged time was running out to agree and implement the changes, which international officials say have to be in place in time for general elections expected in October.

He said decisions would have to be made by March and urged local leaders to redouble their efforts to reach a deal.

“It is very clear that now things have to happen, and progress has to be made, and talks have to take place, on an almost daily basis,” Petritsch said.