

High Representative addresses North Atlantic Council and Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council

In Brussels today, the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, addressed the North Atlantic Council (NAC), NATO's top decision-making body.

The High Representative thanked NATO and SFOR for providing the security umbrella under which peace implementation in Bosnia and Herzegovina takes place, and he pointed to the efficient and continuous exchange of information which takes place between the military and civilian sides of peace implementation in BiH. He also made the case for continued SFOR engagement. "There are those who believe that the time has come for the International Community to pack its bags and move on," he said. "My message to you today is that we are not there yet – to depart now is to risk a failed state in the heart of Europe." He added that "capability is what is important, not numbers," and he acknowledged that "NATO will be the judge of how many troops are required to do this job."

Surveying progress in peace implementation, the High Representative told the NAC that in the last two years more than 130,000 refugees and displaced persons have returned to areas where their ethnic group is in a minority. He said that if this pace is kept up, "the bulk of the remaining refugees and DPs who wish to do so will be able to return to their homes by 2004."

Commenting on the economic situation, the High Representative

pointed to the crucial success of the Convertible Mark. He noted that banking reform in 2001 has had a positive impact and he stressed the need for comprehensive privatisation in 2002. However, he cautioned that BiH has not yet turned the corner economically, with unemployment and poverty still widespread.

On the political front, the High Representative said the coming to power of the Alliance for Change has resulted in a fundamental shift from nationalism to pragmatism. He described his initiative to establish the Partnership Forum and the Civic Forum and expressed the hope that these would contribute to positive developments in politics, economics and society. The High Representative warned, however, that BiH cannot become a normal country as long as indicted war criminals, including Radovan Karadzic and Ratko Mladic, remain at liberty.

The High Representative also noted that since neighbouring Croatia and Yugoslavia have turned away from nationalist policies and since the Balkan countries as a whole are now embracing market reform and Europeanization, BiH must not be left behind. Peace implementation and economic development are matters of extreme urgency. This urgency is reflected in the process of streamlining the International Community's presence in BiH and handing fundamental tasks over to the domestic authorities. "We are actively working ourselves out of a job and the Bosnians into one – taking responsibility for their own obligations and future," the High Representative said.

Describing changes being made in the Entity armed forces so that they suit the needs and resources of BiH and are prepared for participation in NATO's Partnership for Peace programme, the High Representative argued that "SFOR and the International Community should continue their efforts to place BiH on a more regular military footing, with integrated armed

forces." SFOR's role in reforming the armed forces, he said, represents a significant contribution to the overall development of BiH.

In the afternoon, the High Representative addressed the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council, a multilateral forum where NATO's 19 member countries and 27 partner countries meet on a regular basis to discuss political and security-related issues and develop cooperation. The High Representative drew attention to the scope for useful exchanges of information and experience between BiH and EACP countries which have already made a successful transition to market democracy. "The countries of the EACP are particularly well positioned to understand the nature of Bosnia and Herzegovina's painstaking recovery," he said. "Against a backdrop of comprehensive economic reform, Bosnia and Herzegovina's political leadership is striving for greater integration in European structures and its military setup is being readied for participation in Partnership for Peace."