

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, High Representative in BiH: "Pass laws or face consequences, Bosnian Serbs told"

WASHINGTON, Nov 16 (Reuters) – Bosnian Serbs politicians must stop blocking crucial reforms in the next two weeks or face the consequences, Bosnia's top peace overseer said on Friday.

High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch, in Washington for talks with U.S. officials, said the Serb Democratic Party (SDS) had to push through a range of 30 laws aimed at economic reform and stand by their commitments to allow refugees to return.

"These politicians must realize they are in a situation of responsibility and unless they deliver they need to face the consequences. In the case of this legislation, it is very clear this has to happen in the next couple of weeks," Petritsch told Reuters in an interview.

Bosnia, ravaged by ethnic war from 1992 to 1995 after the breakup of Yugoslavia, is now divided into two highly autonomous parts — a Serb republic and a Muslim-Croat federation.

Commentators say the Bosnian Serbs have passed reforms concerning the Serb half of Bosnia, but are dragging their feet over state-level legislation, such as consumer protection laws.

"Legislation has been too long now lingering in the parliament and needs to be passed. They know from me personally what would happen," Petritsch said, but declined to give details.

Under the 1995 Dayton peace treaty, Petritsch has the power from the international community to ban political parties and remove local officials deemed to be hampering Bosnia's progress.

MESSAGE GETTING THROUGH

The peace envoy said he thought his message was reaching key politicians, singling out Prime Minister Mladen Ivanic and Dragan Kalinic, president of SDS.

"When you read Ivanic, when you read the press communique of Kalinic, the SDS leader ... there is a strong indication that they have gotten the message," he said.

Petritsch, who earlier met with U.S. Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage, said the United States had pledged its continued commitment to Bosnia. But he warned there was a danger Bosnia could slip down the international priority list following the Sept. 11 attacks on the United States.

"That's the reason I'm making a renewed effort in motivating and convincing the main actors ... We are on the brink of success and this historic chance must not be missed," he said.

He praised Ivanic for starting the hunt for war crimes suspects, including SDS founder Radovan Karadzic, who has been indicted for genocide. But Petritsch said this was merely a first response and he wanted to see arrests.

"As long as Karadzic is at large, there's not going to be an opportunity for a full normalization of life," he said.

Petritsch will go to Brussels at the beginning of December to outline his recommendations for Bosnia.

He declined to give specific details but said his core proposals would center on establishing a market economy and creating an independent justice system, a nonpolitical multiethnic police force and a reliable public broadcast system.

"I personally believe that we should provide these necessary basic preconditions for a viable multiethnic democratic Bosnia ... within the next four to six years," he said.