

Interview: Wolfgang Petritsch, High Representative for BiH "The Danger for Bosnia Has Shifted"

High Representative of the International Community, Wolfgang Petritsch, comments on the possibilities of dragging BiH into conflict

8 October 2001

After the attacks on New York and Washington, Bosnia has been in focus again, but this time in the context of activities of international, particularly Islamic, terrorists and extremist organizations. There has been some speculation that Bin Laden holds a Bosnian passport, but there is no doubt as to the fact that Bosnia was the residence of a large number of volunteers from the Islamic world. This week, the BiH Parliament held a debate on terrorism, where the former warring parties presented different views on the issue. For some representatives, such as those from the Republika Srpska, the most important thing was to launch an inquiry into the exact time and the areas in which Bin Laden's associates stayed in Bosnia. For others, it was unbelievable that those people whose creation is the product of the "darkest terrorism" (this is a reference to the Republika Srpska) could hold discussions on terrorism.

On the streets of Sarajevo one can see posters posing the question: "How long can we stand injustice to the Islamic world?" – starting from Bosnia, Pakistan, Kosovo and Afghanistan now. One of the most powerful people on the BH political scene, Haris Silajdzic, together with David Phillips from the Foreign Policy Council, wrote a piece which was published in the "International Herald Tribune" where he noted that the world needs American leadership, but also expressed the frustration of the Muslim world over American policy, primarily "its unconditional support for the Israeli side". A few days earlier, SFOR arrested two Arabs on suspicion that they were connected with terrorist groups, while several Pakistanis were ordered to leave the country. Today we are speaking about these issues with the High Representative of the International Community, Wolfgang Petritsch, looking for answers to the question – can Bosnia become a part of the conflict that will arise after the US intervention in Afghanistan.

Danas: You have established a group to fight against terrorism. Is the terrorist danger real for Bosnia?

WP: On the day of the attacks, I met with Prime Minister Lagumdzija and recommended the establishment of an operational anti-terrorist body that will include several Ministries. International organizations, the OSCE and the UN will render assistance to them, but it is important that local authorities take a leading role in this fight. It is important that a country like Bosnia, which has a negative image due to the war, and due to very weak state organization, acts with urgency in this respect. These activities are ongoing and strongly supported by SFOR, which has 20,000 soldiers in Bosnia. SFOR co-operates with the local authorities and the police.

Danas: Is the terrorist threat serious for Bosnia? How can the attacks on America influence the situation in Bosnia?

WP: Six years after the event, one cannot immediately see the dangers, but the issue which remains is that of foreign volunteers who fought on the Bosniak side during the war. The Dayton Agreement should have resolved this issue. It envisaged the withdrawal of all foreign troops, including paramilitary and voluntary formations. That objective has been achieved to a great extent, but some individuals stayed behind. They became Bosnian citizens under somewhat unclear circumstances. Those circumstances must be clarified now. In addition, due to weak border control there are great possibilities for illegal migration to Bosnia and further to the West. These may include both criminal and terrorist elements. We have established the State Border Service, which covers almost the entire border of Bosnia and Herzegovina. We are also working on the introduction of new laws and the electronic processing of personal documents. This should be done by next year. Bosnia is not a target area for economic migration. It is becoming a transit country for Europe and in that respect this issue represents a European problem.

Danas: Over the last few days the international press has been writing about the active engagement of Bin Laden's people during the war in Bosnia. Did you investigate this and what are your findings?

WP: We cannot confirm or deny this. During the war there were no real records on people entering and leaving the country. However, of course, the authorities at that time took all the allegations seriously. Investigations are ongoing in order to check these allegations and establish the facts. The BiH authorities have established Commissions that are working on the review of citizenship documents which were issued over the last few years.

Danas: SFOR arrested three persons on suspicion that they had connections with international terrorism. The Minister of the Interior stated that the arrival of tens of Afghan people to Bosnia could be expected. Are these signals that Bosnia could be involved in the forthcoming conflict?

WP: It is true that SFOR and the local police have arrested a number of individuals, but their connection with international terrorist organizations is not established. This will be clarified in the next few days. As far as Afghan arrivals are concerned, the traces are being followed, but there have been no negative or positive findings. International agencies, SFOR, the UN and the local authorities are carefully monitoring developments. The danger of having Bosnia, with a majority Muslim population, involved in the conflict within the community of Islamic countries is overestimated. The Bosnian variant of Islam is European. I do not see a great danger of Islamic fundamentalism. On the other hand, economic and social problems and the lack of prospects for young people lead to radicalization. One of the variants of radicalization is Islamic fundamentalism. I see prevention of such a radicalization through the integration of Bosnia in the European system of values. The first thing is a more intensive co-operation among all three groups in Bosnia and a stronger connection between Bosnia and the European family of nations.

Danas: Those arrested are members of a Saudi NGO which has, according to the international press, some Mujaheddin soldiers from the war in its membership who are now trying to strengthen the Islamic character of Bosnia. What information do you have regarding NGOs from the Arab world?

WP: There is still a large number of NGOs from the Arab and Islamic world. Their role here is constructive to a great extent. It is in the interest of these organizations to state their function here clearly. It is in their interest to ensure that their associates do not abuse the organizations for which they work.

Danas: The famous village of Bocinja is near Maglaj. It is a Serb village which was inhabited by Mujaheddin.

WP: Last summer I had to find a radical solution as there was a great danger of conflict between Serb returnees and 35 Mujaheddin families who arrived there. Some were living there illegally. They were under the spiritual guidance of a certain Abu Hamza. Abu Hamza is a naturalized Bosnian who married a Bosnian woman and acquired Bosnian citizenship. He was born in a Palestinian refugee camp in Syria and studied here in Sarajevo. He was in the Bosniak Army during the war. We resettled a number of those families to other areas, but some Mujaheddin families, who legally purchased houses from the Serb families, remained in Bocinja. There are seven of them so far. There are some tensions from time to time, but it is important for people to understand diversity of cultures.

Danas: These people fought on the Muslim side during the war. Due to this and due to his appearance at some Mujaheddin parades, the German and French press have mentioned the president, at the time, Alija Izetbegovic, as someone who, allegedly, supported them. Are you investigating his role too?

WP: I have to remind you here that the former Yugoslavia had the UN arms embargo and the Bosniak side was militarily inferior to the Croat and Serb side. In distress, they sought assistance wherever they could. The Islamic support had an important role at the time. Now, the war is over and it is time to remove all doubts about the events of the past and move forward into a clear future.

Danas: Are you referring to Mr. Izetbegovic too?

WP: Every person, who has the duty to contribute to this end, to clarify what happened during the war, must do that. They have to clarify things in their own interest. This applies to all three nations.

Danas: Bosniak generals are now in The Hague. What is happening with Karadzic and Mladic?

WP: Recently there has been a change among all the three groups. They are all trying to co-operate with The Hague in the best possible manner. Bosniak generals went to The Hague on a more or less voluntary basis, a Bosnian Serb is getting ready to go to The Hague on a voluntary basis. It is of crucial importance for the Serbs in BiH to hand over those indicted of having committed war crimes, as the Law on co-operation with The Hague is in place. This would definitely remove the shadow of collective guilt which still hangs over Serbs. All Serbs, on both sides of the River Drina, but primarily those here in Bosnia, have a great interest in the appearance of these individuals before the Court as soon as possible.

Danas: SFOR cannot or does not want to arrest Karadzic and Mladic?

WP: Unfortunately, I see great understanding for Karadzic. The policy in the RS has done too little to explain things to people who still have one-sided information and believe in whatever some media and politicians tell them. Here, too, we must have developments that are taking place in Belgrade on a much greater scale.

Danas: Carla del Ponte has extended the indictment against Slobodan Milosevic to include crimes in Bosnia and Croatia. Can attacks on New York and Washington influence the position of Milosevic in The Hague i.e. strengthen his position?

WP: There are two different things. In the Milosevic's case it was a policy that had a strong genocidal character, especially here in Bosnia. In the other case we speak about serious crime, mass murder that has nothing in common with cultural diversities. Milosevic's policy was led within the same cultural circle, aimed at implementation of the "Greater Serbia" policy. Milosevic's presence in The Hague is justified but his role in Bosnia and Croatia needs to be clarified as well as the role of other politicians – Tudjman and Izetbegovic. We must accurately establish the causes of this tragic conflict and dissolution of Yugoslavia.