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Provided by the United NationsThe situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina was improving, but the “litmus test” of reconciliation would be the return of refugees, the High Representative for Implementation of the Peace Agreement on Bosnia and Herzegovina, Carlos Westendorp, said today.

Speaking at a Headquarters press conference following his briefing to the Security Council this morning, Mr. Westendorp said that while the bottle remained only half full, much progress had been achieved in last three months. A new political party had been established on the Croat side and pluralism had emerged in the Republika Srpska, where elections were scheduled for September. Admittedly, those elections would not solve the problem overnight, but municipal elections were expected in 1999 and general elections were scheduled for the year 2000. In addition, freedom of movement had improved in the country, and common license plates and a single currency were in use.

A bill on economic privatization, which would permit economic revitalization, had been approved by the Lower House of parliament, but it had failed to pass the Upper House. However, based on recent recommendations of the Peace Implementation Conference meeting in Bonn, he said he had been empowered to enforce laws not yet approved, but necessary for the country. In the case of the economic privatization bill, he had overridden the rejection, because it was needed to boost the local economy. He noted that a boycott by the Serb representatives in the House of the Peoples had caused it to fail.

Despite general progress, several points still needed to be

addressed, he said. Those included the return of refugees. Although the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had projected that 50,000 refugees would return to their points of origin, only 11,000 refugees had returned home. In addition, the judicial system needed to be reformed. While the judges now serving were competent professionals, they had been elected by political parties.

A continued international presence was necessary to face those challenges during the coming months, he said. The continued presence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-led multinational Stabilization Force (SFOR) remained vital to preserving a secure environment. Mobile troops were needed to prevent civilian demonstrations against the return of refugees. He also noted that normalization of the country would not be until Radovan Karadzic, the former Bosnian Serb political leader, was brought before the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia.

Asked about what he viewed as priorities, Mr. Westendorp said the main priority was the introduction of the rule of law. Other priorities included the return of refugees, judicial and police reform, and the establishment of border police units to prevent smuggling and illegal trafficking.

To a question on the restructuring of the state television and radio, he said the media in the Republika Srpska had been restructured last year. An international supervisor, who was not a political agent, had been appointed. Although he was not a manager, he was an advisor to the new board of directors comprised of independent professionals. The Croat and Bosniak authorities had been consulted on the appointment. The trade unions also had participated and had supported that reform. Transforming Bosnian television into the television of all the people, instead of a system which served only one political party, had been a major step.

A correspondent asked for comment on a 26 July The New York

Times article reporting that the United States had dropped plans to arrest Mr. Karadzic and General Ratko Mladic, the former commander of the Bosnian Serb forces. Mr. Westendorp said that while he had a deep appreciation for the journalists of The New York Times, he preferred to believe that their report was not correct in that case. He reiterated that until Mr. Karadzic was brought for trial at The Hague there would be no normalization of the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The collective guilt of the population must come to rest on several persons. Once that was done, the country could approach normalization and reconciliation.

Continuing, he said that Mr. Karadzic was becoming more isolated and that his views were accepted by fewer people. He was no longer the national war hero he had been some months ago. Nor was he heavily protected as he had been, because he had no means of paying for that protection. All signs pointed to the need and the feasibility of taking him before the Tribunal, either voluntarily or by persuasion. Asked whether the Americans would inform him of any change in policy, he said he did not believe there had been a change in policy. Perhaps the journalist had been reporting on plans which were no longer necessary in light of the new situation. Information in the article did not apply to the present situation, but rather to the past. Specifically, the report referred to Mr. Karadzic as being heavily protected.

To a question about whether the French position towards Mr. Karadzic and General Mladic had changed in the last couple of months as indicated in The New York Times story, he said he did not think that was accurate. The French military personnel with whom he had recently spoken shared the view of other SFOR troops, namely that the war criminals, especially the most important, should be taken to The Hague by force if the circumstances permitted. Asked about the formation of a new political party, he said he welcomed its birth. It was a democratic party, which favoured compliance with the General

Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Moreover, competition between political parties was a healthy new reality that should be welcomed.

Asked about the sudden change in the perception of Mr. Karadzic and asked if he supported the view that forceful arrest of Mr. Karadzic or General Mladic might lead to a new round of violence, he replied that both questions were linked. Views of Mr. Karadzic had changed during the last seven months due to the new government. Also during that time, the population had seen a dramatic improvement in the economic situation and in their ability to exercise their democratic rights. They were no longer intimidated by the police or other authorities, except in some areas which were still under the control of the “hard-liners”.

There had been economic growth in the Republika Srpska, he continued. It was expected that the economy of the Republika would generate 35 per cent of the gross national product. The population was beginning to feel that they had been “kidnapped”, largely owing to the presence of General Mladic and Mr. Karadzic in their country.

Asked for a comment on the refusal of some in Banja Luka to bury a Muslim cleric last Friday, Mr. Westendorp said it was the hard-liners in Banja Luka who had prevented a peaceful burial. The burial in Sarejevo had been a temporary solution to a problem. However, the overall problem must be solved. First the mosque must be rebuilt and then the Muslim cleric must be allowed to rest beneath it.