

Remarks by the High Representative Paddy Ashdown at the Opening of the Premises of the State Investigation and Protection Agency

I am delighted to be here today to mark an important day for this country.

Later in the week we will open the Mostar Bridge . That is a big moment of closure on our war torn past. Today we are placing the keystone in the architecture of law and order, which will protect us in the future.

Today, with the entry into force of the key laws establishing the State Investigation and Protection Agency, Bosnia and Herzegovina takes a decisive step forward in its ability to protect its own citizens, and to play a proper part in contributing to the security of this whole region.

It is the first duty of any state to ensure the safety of its people, and to work with its neighbours and the wider world to ensure that the security of the world beyond its borders.

The entry into force of the key laws establishing the State Investigation and Protection Agency (SIPA) will transform the current SIPA agency into a robust police force at the State level, capable of fighting organised crime, illegal immigration, international terrorism, money laundering and serious economic crime, and apprehending indicted war criminals.

Not before time. For too long, BiH has been at the mercy of the organised criminals who have preyed on the weakness of this country's institutions and profited from the legacy of the war. They have enriched themselves, impoverished BiH, and damaged the country's reputation in this region and beyond.

We are beginning, at last, to fight back. The State Court has already tried and convicted the biggest human trafficking case in BiH's history. And is proving that even those who have occupied the highest positions in the land can still have to answer to the counts. We are showing that no one is beyond the law in BiH.

But up to now, a crucial weapon has been missing in the armoury of those who fight for justice. SIPA will fill that gap. SIPA is the keystone on which BiH's criminal justice system will in future depend.

SIPA will reinforce the work of the Prosecutors' Office and the Court of BiH by investigating crimes, and by helping to make sure that criminals are brought to justice and prosecuted. It will work together with the newly-established Intelligence and Security Agency (OSA) to fight threats to the State, including terrorism.

But it will do more than that. By contributing to law enforcement both within BiH, and by working with law enforcement authorities across this region and throughout Europe, SIPA will help to establish BiH as a reliable law enforcement partner – as part of the solution to tackling crime in this region, rather than part of the problem.

I cannot overstate the importance of this for this country's reputation.

If the European Union is to even to consider a relaxation of the visa requirements imposed on BiH citizens, then it must be able to rely on the law enforcement authorities here in BiH. Because in this modern, interconnected world, criminals are no respecters of boundaries and nations. They co-operate very effectively, and if we are to beat them, we have to work together even more closely that the criminals do.

So getting SIPA fully operational is an essential first step towards greater freedom of travel between this country and the rest of Europe.

It will help to show that this country is at last getting serious about its national security.

But of course getting SIPA running will not be enough in itself. This country's – and especially the RS Entity's – failure to cooperate fully with the ICTY is now proving a major block on its road to Europe.

At Istanbul last month, it prevented this country joining NATO's Partnership for Peace; and if it continues, it is very

likely to block BiH's progress towards the European Union as well.

This has got to change, which means addressing not just the political failures, but the systemic policing failures which are preventing this country from honouring its international obligations.

That is why Prime Minister Terzic and I have now jointly set up a Police Restructuring Commission. Its primary task will be to propose a single structure of policing for BiH by the end of this year.

For the citizens of this country, police restructuring will help provide them with the standards of policing they want and deserve, policing that meets the highest European standards, and which paves the way for this country to move forward in its relations with the key Euro Atlantic institutions.

For the vast majority of professional police officers in BiH, police restructuring will help them do away with the systemic obstacles that exist, not to hinder the work of the traffickers and the smugglers, but to frustrate those who, divided between BiH's eighteen law enforcement agencies, are daily trying to pursue and catch them.

So I very much welcome the establishment today of SIPA – not as the last, but one of the first, and the most crucial steps in building a safer BiH, a BiH that is at last determined to crack down on criminals and pursue them rigorously; a BiH committed to the security of its own communities; a BiH that can make a credible bid to lift visa restrictions on travel; a BiH determined to contribute to the security of the Europe it wishes to join.