Press Briefing by High Representative for Implementation of Peace Agreement on Bosnia and Herzegovina

Provided by the United Nations

The Kosovo crisis had stalled the pace of the peace process in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Carlos Westendorp, the High Representative for the Implementation of the Peace Agreement on Bosnia and Herzegovina, said today at a Headquarters press briefing.

Following his briefing to the Security Council this morning, Mr. Westendorp said the Kosovo crisis was greatly affecting the implementation of peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, both in terms of the political tensions in the Republika Srpska and the difficulties in forming a new moderate government. The arrival of some 40,000 refugees from Sanjak, Kosovo and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – on top of the many displaced persons already in the country – was also affecting implementation.

Economically, trade relations had been severed between the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Republika Srpska. That had severely affected Republika Srpska, which conducted approximately 75 per cent of its trade with the Federal Republic. For all those reasons, a donor conference was being held in Brussels from 20 to 21 May, in order to rally the necessary support to continue operations in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The situation was difficult, and that "in a nutshell" was what he had told the Security Council.

Despite the current problems, there had been progress in the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the climate was peaceful, he said. The people's reaction to the Kosovo crisis had been moderate, despite a few burnings of British and American offices in Banja Luka. Apart from those initial reactions, however, the situation was calm. People were concerned, of course, because their families were on the other side of the Drina River, but the amazing calm underscored the population's desire for peace and a return to normalcy.

Asked about the composition of refugees crossing the border from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and their effect on the economy and political situation in the Republika Srpska, the High Representative said that approximately 15,000 to 20,000 refugees had arrived from Sanjak, following the air strikes. Many of them had come to live with their friends or relatives in the Bosniak or Muslim part of the country, and many had come to avoid conscription into the Federal Republic's army. There were also some 15,000 Kosovo Albanians – mostly elderly and children – who were in the Federation part of the country. An additional 20,000 Serbs, many of whom were also avoiding the call to war, had come from the Federal Republic itself.

Achieving moderation in Bosnia and Herzegovina had also been jeopardized by the situation in Kosovo, he said. Every citizen in the Republika Srpska had a friend or relative in Belgrade or in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and they called their families every morning to hear an update on the situation. The extremists, or hard liners were exploiting that circumstance with propaganda: they told the moderates to look at what the international community was doing to their families in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia – anyone cooperating with the international community was a traitor.

Continuing, he said his Office was closely monitoring the situation. Milorad Dodik, the moderate, was still the caretaker Prime Minister of Republika Srpska. Mr. Westendorp

was dealing with the Vice-President of the Republic, who was the only one recognized by his Office. Although the Vice-President was a member of the extremist party, he belonged to a more moderate line, which sought to cooperate with the international community. Hopefully, in the coming weeks, and at the conclusion of the Kosovo crisis, the formation of a new government could be discussed.

In a follow-up question, the correspondent asked if anything else could be done to counter the propaganda. Mr. Westendorp said his Office was carefully monitoring the official television through an international administrator. It was also seeking to ensure that the propaganda originating in Belgrade was balanced by the information emanating from Western sources.

The situation was not ideal because the propaganda from Belgrade was really “very hard stuff”, but he said he could not do much more than balance the broadcasting. An Independent Media Commission had been closing down some radio stations for “pouring inflammatory propaganda onto the [air] waves”. The problem was being dealt with on a case-by-case basis with institutions in place for opening up the media.

Did he think the ongoing bombing campaign against Slobodan Milosevic was going to resolve the problems in Kosovo, and did he support the idea of turning him over to the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia?

Mr. Westendorp said he had to be careful about talking about Mr. Milosevic, since his mandate was confined to Bosnia and Herzegovina. A stable and lasting solution was unlikely, however, as long as Mr. Milosevic was in power. A temporary solution to stop the war and end the suffering of many people, and maybe even the establishment of an international administration in Kosovo was possible, but a durable solution required the full democratization of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It was not possible to respect minorities without

full respect for the majorities.

Whether Mr. Milosevic was indicted or not was in the hands of the Tribunal, he said, adding that his hope was that the air strikes would lead to a negotiated peace. Unfortunately, given Mr. Milosevic's refusal of the elements of the Rambouillet talks, that had not been possible.

Was bombing the way to achieve peace? the correspondent asked in a follow-up question. The High Representative said "well, it has been so far. I think so, yes".

To a request that he elaborate on the criteria for closing down a radio station, Mr. Westendorp said he had set up an Independent Media Commission, which was composed of locals and internationals during the transitional period. It would later be staffed by people from Bosnia and Herzegovina only. The normal criteria of licensing broadcasters and radio stations was being applied, and compliance with the code of conduct of "normal" journalism was being monitored. If radio or television broadcasters did not comply with the standards of the Federation of Independent Journalists of Europe and worldwide, the Commission had the authority to withdraw their licenses.

Based on his experience in Bosnia and Herzegovina, what was the best model for reintegrating refugees back into Kosovo? another correspondent asked.

Mr. Westendorp said the problem in Bosnia had been the scattering of refugees all over the world. Many had already settled down with jobs, and it was very unlikely they would return to a place without jobs or security. The best approach for Kosovo would be to keep the refugees as near to the border as possible, in preparation to take them back to their homes. In order for them to return, however, they had to be truly protected.

The approach followed in Dayton had been slow. he added.

Although he had been empowered to remove authorities, implement legislation, and so forth, he did not control the executive, legislative or judicial powers. That should be done on a temporary basis in Kosovo. There had to be a real "protectorate" in order to enable the refugees to return home. The best way to do that was through a high representative model, representing the United Nations, as well as the European Union, the United States and other members of the international community. There should be just one authority. The Eastern Slavonia model – which was a pure United Nations model – could be followed, or the Bosnia model, but with more executive, legislative and judicial powers.

What about Ratko Mladic and Radovon Karadzic, who seemed to have gotten away with genocide? another correspondent asked.

[Mr. Karadzic was President of the Bosnian Serb Republic from 1992 to 1996. Mr. Mladic was General, Commander of the Bosnian Serb Army, during those same years.]

Mr. Westendorp said that he and his predecessor had always plead for cutting the links of Mr. Karadzic and Mr. Mladic from protection and economic black marketeering. He had been optimistic that they would be brought before The Hague, but as his own departure was nearing, he was becoming pessimistic about that possibility. That had to be done, and it was within the mandate of the NATO-led multinational Stabilization Force (SFOR) troops to do so if they came across them. Until Mr. Karadzic was in The Hague, there would be no normal life in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It had to be done, but unfortunately it had not been done.

Asked about the percentage success of refugees from Bosnia who had tried to return home, Mr. Westendorp said that a distinction should be made between the refugees returning to areas where they were the majority, which had been rather successful and had totalled some 500,000, and refugees returning to an area in which they represented the minority.

The latter had been much more difficult, with the figure totalling not more than 100,000 out of 800,000.