

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

Provided by the United Nations

The “unsung success story” in Bosnia and Herzegovina, five years after the Dayton peace accords, was the reconstruction of the infrastructure of the war-torn country, Wolfgang Petritsch, High Representative for the Implementation of the Peace Agreement on Bosnia and Herzegovina, said at a Headquarters press briefing this afternoon.

He recalled that a \$5 billion rescue package had been put in place in 1995-1996 for the rebuilding of the country, and added that most of the money had been spent. Some parts of the country’s new infrastructure were even better than they had been before the war.

It was the big success story, he said. The political issues were being addressed. It was very much a story where the “hearts and minds of the people” were involved. “It is easier to reconstruct a bridge than the multi-ethnicity that existed before the war”, he said. “It is slow, but we are making progress.”

Mr. Petritsch, who briefed correspondents after addressing the Security Council, said Council members and non-members had exhibited an enormous interest in developments in the region. Noting that it was time to take stock after five years of the Dayton peace accords, he said he believed that the current situation was very conducive to further, successful implementation of the accords. Recent changes in Belgrade boded well, as did the democratic changes that had taken place at the beginning of the year in Croatia.

The plans by former Yugoslav President Slobodan Milosevic and the late Croatian leader Franjo Tudjman to carve out Bosnia and Herzegovina had now been put to rest. The international community could now move on to finish the job in Bosnia and Herzegovina under better circumstances, he said.

He told the press that he had met the new Yugoslav President Vojislav Kostunica in Belgrade. The President, in return, had made an unscheduled visit to Sarajevo last Sunday. Those were very good signs following Zagreb’s signal that it fully recognized Bosnian sovereignty. He hoped the new democratic leadership in Belgrade would follow suit. He looked forward to the establishment of early diplomatic relations between Belgrade and Sarajevo.

Another positive event was the meeting — for the first time — of the regional leaders in Skopje, including the Yugoslav leader. All had expressed a desire to join the European Union, but only a few were ready to cooperate in the region. Regional integration based on the Western European model was needed in the Balkans, he said, stressing the importance of the meeting.

Touching on events in Bosnia and Herzegovina itself, he said elections had been scheduled for 11 November, and he was cautiously optimistic that moderate multi-ethnic forces would gain ground as they had done in local elections last April. His administration was concentrating on three strategic areas of thorough economic reform as the engine that would drive the implementation of the peace process. Priority was being given to refugee return. Several hundred thousand internally displaced persons still wanted to go home. All indications were that getting them back home would be a success story — one delayed for too many years.

Mr. Petritsch said most of those who wanted to return would be able to do so, but there was a need to be realistic. What had been destroyed by war could not be fully recreated again. The three multi-ethnic communities — Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats — would have to live together in the State of Bosnia and Herzegovina. They were beginning to realize that living together was not only necessary, it even made sense. The proper State institutional framework had to be put in place.

The Dayton accords model for Bosnia and Herzegovina was a highly decentralized political system, where most of the power lay with the two entities — Republic Srpska and the Bosnia-Croat Federation, he said. He was working on a lean and efficient State-level government, and the progress had so far been quite remarkable.

A State-level public broadcasting system had been established, and would include the two entities, he said. It

would be beefed up by other measures in the economic field. He believed in functional integration, he stated, adding that economic reform would play an important role in the integration of the State of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

A correspondent asked whether Mr. Petritsch could confirm, from his talks with Yugoslav President Kostunica, that he harboured no aspirations towards the neighbouring countries. Mr. Petritsch replied that, although President Kostunica had been described as a nationalist, he would call him a "Serb patriot". President Kostunica's position on issues needed to be constantly checked, and that was what was happening. "If he wants to establish good relations with the international community or his neighbours, of course, he needs to stick to the status quo when it comes to international borders. It is also in his own interest."

He said the President would be in "big trouble" if he disregarded the sovereignty of any of the neighbouring States. In Kosovo he would need to convince the international community and the people living there that the status quo and the sovereignty of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was the best thing for all of them. "I believe the dream of greater Serbia is definitely gone", he said.

The correspondent also asked what President Kostunica considered a special relationship with Bosnia and Herzegovina. Mr. Petritsch said that at their meeting he had stressed the State-to-State relationship. That was why he had insisted on the President visiting Sarejevo, the capital of a sovereign neighbouring State. By "accepting and embracing this idea, I believe, he demonstrated that he is serious when it comes to the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the acceptance of the Dayton accords."

He told another correspondent that the international community accepted responsibility for what was happening in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It had enough checks and balances to make sure that maximum results were produced. The international community was providing assistance, but in the end, Bosnia and Herzegovina had to be built by its own citizens. That responsibility had to be accepted by them.

It had to be borne in mind, he added, that the responsibility for tolerance, compromise, and a democratic approach was not in the tradition of the whole region. "We are not only talking of peace implementation, according to Dayton, but of a much wider, maybe even more profound, transition process that goes on in Bosnia and Herzegovina."

Mr. Petritsch said he deeply believed that the democratic process driven by elections would, in the end, produce the necessary positive results and the establishment of a normal, modern European Bosnia and Herzegovina.

He told a correspondent that he would welcome democratic change in Kosovo, with the people having responsibilities for their province. He expressed disappointment that the Serb community was not ready to join. He was hopeful that under positive influence from Belgrade they would join the democratic process and try to hammer out a model of coexistence in Bosnia. With the advent of democracy and democratic institutions, including elections in the region, he said there was need to strengthen the spirit of people. That could be reinforced by the upcoming elections in Kosovo.

With regard to the forthcoming United States elections, he said the country was a prime actor in the Balkans, including both Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. He was quite confident that the new administration would realize that the United States was playing a very important role in the Balkans, and that its presence would be needed for quite some time. He said he had spoken with representatives from the two presidential candidates and had been assured of that. He also said the international community would need to decrease its engagement, but that would have to be commensurate with the results on the ground.