

Press Briefing by High Representative for Implementation of Dayton Accords

Provided by the United Nations

Four and a half years after the Dayton Peace Accords, their implementation in Bosnia and Herzegovina was a success, correspondents were told this afternoon at a Headquarters press briefing. The progress so far achieved demonstrated that it was “much, much cheaper to continue to finance what is becoming more and more of an eventual success story” than to have pay for crisis intervention — which, as evidenced by other parts of the world, was so much more expensive.

“It’s tedious and it’s slow, but it’s working”, said Wolfgang Petritsch, High Representative for the Implementation of the Peace Agreement on Bosnia and Herzegovina. The results of the local elections, held in April, also boded well for peace. There had been a shift away from the extremist nationalist parties to moderate groups. In the Federation, a moderate, multi-ethnic party had won the majority of votes. Even in the Republic of Srpska, there was success in the moderating political forces there. There were also more opportunities to vote for moderate parties in the Republic. The elections were an important indication that things were moving in the right direction in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

“The agenda of the day for us is to reinforce and get things done in a more forceful and hands-on way. We need to make clear to the political establishment in Bosnia and Herzegovina that time is of the essence. Time is running out, as is money. This is going to be quite a tight race, but I’m confident that people will understand the message and that the international community will support my efforts in this respect.” Mr. Petritsch, who had just finished presenting the sixteenth report on the implementation of the Bosnia and Herzegovina peace agreement to the Security Council, said he was impressed by the keen interest of the Council members. He said he solicited continued financial and political support for the peace implementation process.

Over the next 18 months to two years, there would be a focus on three key areas: institution-building; thorough economic reform; and accelerating the return of refugees. The common institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina needed to be strengthened. It was a highly decentralized State with basically two entities — the Bosnian-Croat Federation and the Republic of Srpska. In order to enter European integration structures, the country needed an efficient State-level apparatus in place. Economic reforms would serve as the engine for further changes and were the centrepiece of implementation efforts.

As to the refugees, he said there were 800,000 internally displaced persons and 300,000 outside the country. Referring to “minority” returns, he said 40,000 refugees had been returned in 1998. The figure doubled to 80,000 in 1999, despite the crisis in Kosovo and other internal crises in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Indications were that there would be another doubling of the figure for the year 2000. By the end of the next two years, he expected that the “mass returns” would draw to a close.

Asked why the refugees in Bosnia and Herzegovina had not returned as quickly as those in Kosovo, Mr. Petritsch replied that a greater passage of time was a factor. The international community had intervened in Kosovo at a much earlier stage of the deportations, so that within a few weeks returns had been possible. By contrast, it had taken four years to stop the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina. A quarter of the population had been displaced within that time. He added that another factor was the ethnic and nationalistic agendas that had survived the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and remained quite virulent in some areas.

In response to another correspondent, who asked for confirmation that Mr. Petritsch had been correctly quoted as accepting that certain aspects of the Dayton Peace Accords had to be changed, Mr. Petritsch said there was an ongoing discussion in the country on the subject of changes to the Accords. He personally believed there was enough space within the Accords for improvement. As an example, he said the Dayton Accords were not preventing the return of refugees, as some charged. What was preventing their return was the vested interests of some nationalistic politicians. That could not be changed by changing the Dayton Accords. “Maybe with an exchange of politicians there, you would succeed with Dayton and within Dayton”, he said.

“But”, he continued, “in the mid-to longer-term, if the three constituent peoples of Bosnia and Herzegovina decide

in a democratic process in their State Parliament that they want to change the Dayton constitution, they can go ahead and do it. . . This is not something that is written in stone. It can be changed.”

Another correspondent asked if it was realistic of Bosnia and Herzegovina to aspire to membership in the Council of Europe. Mr. Petritsch said he believed that it should be a member, but first it needed to establish the basic features of statehood. Moreover, in terms of human rights, of the 40 identified issues, 33 remained unresolved. “The lack of political will and compromise in Bosnia and Herzegovina impedes their membership in the Council of Europe”, he said.