

Article by the High Representative, Carlos Westendorp: "Bosnian Serbs Can Help to Guarantee the Peace"

SARAJEVO – On March 5, I fired a president, the leader of the Bosnian Serbs. It was with regret, and as a last resort, that on behalf of the international community I ordered the removal of Nikola Poplasen.

This, together with the decision on the same day not to award the disputed town of Brcko to the Serbs but to turn it into a neutral district, inevitably sparked a degree of turbulence in Republika Srpska.

Slobodan Milosevic sought to capitalize on all this by accusing me of acting outside my mandate. He fooled nobody.

The destiny of the Bosnian Serbs is no longer controlled by Belgrade. Nor would the great majority of the Serbs who live in Republika Srpska wish it to be.

After the Brcko decision, Serbian hard-liners organized two demonstrations in Brcko. Belgrade claimed that the second of these involved an angry mob 2,000 strong. In reality, neither demonstration numbered more than 200 citizens, and both were orderly. That is not a revolt but a legitimate expression of public opinion, and I welcome it.

There are signs that matters are returning to normal in Republika Srpska. The National Assembly and the public are beginning to understand why I was forced to act as I did.

President Poplasen had been warned; we spoke to him many times, publicly and in private. But from the moment of his

election last September he persistently abused his position to obstruct implementation of the Dayton peace agreement. Most serious was his refusal to nominate a viable candidate for prime minister. For the last six months, therefore, the National Assembly has been forced to function without one.

It has been evident for many months that only one member of the National Assembly can command a workable majority, and that is Milorad Dodik, the prime minister of the last administration, who has been acting as caretaker. His government has shown a willingness to comply with the demands of the peace process.

Mr. Poplasen, a hard-liner of the old school, responded by refusing to sign legislation legally passed by a majority vote of the National Assembly.

The final straw came when he sought to remove Mr. Dodik on the say-so of a handful of fellow hard-liners. That was nothing short of an attempted coup d'état. It was in no one's interest that Mr. Poplasen remain, which was why I had to invoke my powers under Dayton to remove him. That decision has been further justified by his subsequent call for violent civil disobedience.

The National Assembly initially responded with a vote of confidence in President Poplasen. That response, I believe, was in part based on the widely misunderstood (and wholly unrelated) decision on Brcko. The vote took place at an emergency session called on March 7, when delegates had barely had time to read the details of this complex decision. The vote came, in other words, not from the head but from the heart.

My office is engaged in an information campaign to explain the complexities of the Brcko neutral district. We are reassuring Bosnian Serbs that the territory of Republika Srpska remains contiguous, that nothing has changed overnight, and that they

have nothing to fear. That message is getting through.

The Brcko decision was made by an independent arbitrator, the distinguished American jurist Roberts Owen. My office had no influence over its timing or its content. That said, I am convinced that the decision is a just one, favoring neither one side nor the other. The only victors are the citizens of Brcko itself, for whom the decision means an end to three years of uncertainty and opens the door to foreign investment, prosperity and growth.

I understand that Bosnian Serbs may have objections to details of the establishment of the district. That is why I have already met with a specially formed National Assembly commission, and will do so again over the next two months, in order to hear them out. I will of course give the commission's opinion every consideration when the time comes to set up the new Brcko District Assembly. I am greatly encouraged by the speed with which this commission has come forward.

There are forces at work, both in Bosnia and in the wider region, that would like to see the failure of the Dayton project. Reasoned debate and constructive dialogue – that is the way to ensure that these forces do not prevail.