Article by the High Representative, Carlos Westendorp:”Charlemagne — Carlos Westendorp, Bosnia’s Euro-Spanish viceroy”

Bosnia’s three main ethnic groups may have stopped killing each other, but they still balk at calling each other compatriots. So when the time came to devise a common passport, it was Carlos Westendorp, the West’s man in Bosnia, who had to force a design on the stubborn nationalists. Thousands of Westendorp approved passports were duly printed, at which point ghastly error was discovered: the Serbo-Croat case endings were wrong. The entire print run had to be pulped.

Victory followed by setback in the daily routine of what Mr Westendorp likes to call an “almost impossible job”: transforming Bosnia from a landscape of mass graves and bombed-out villages into a real country. He has, it would seem, plenty of help. Some 35,000 NATO-led troops are on hand to keep the peace. Dozens of international agencies, most of them sporting acronyms at least four letters long, are running Bosnia’s elections, resettling its refugees, cleaning up its customs service and the like. On the top of them all, or at least the non-military ones, sits this plump, Dutch-descended, Spanish diplomat. He is known as the international community’s “High Representative”. And since last December the High Rep has had the power, granted by the European (including Russian) and American governments that are his main bosses, to force compliance with the Dayton peace accord on local politicians who would love to split Bosnia into lucrative ethnic fiefs.

Mr Westendorp looks the right sort of man for the job. Although his career matured in a much tamer habitat-that of the European Community before it became a Union-he defended Spanish interests with a strident pugnacity that had echoes of Margaret Thatcher in her fiercer moments. When the Maastricht treaty was in its painful drafting stages, he was one who threatened on Spain's behalf to sink it unless the EU's poorer countries got billions of ecus in extra subsidies. He got his way. Mr Westendorp faintly detached, unhurried manner bespeaks gentleness, which those who know him say is real. That does not stop him from being an "accomplished backroom negotiator", as one British diplomat puts it.

Since he took over from Carl Bildt, a Swedish ex-prime minister, in mid-1997, he has forced Bosnia's nationalist leaders to drop ethnic markings on license plates (to promote freedom of movement) and to accept a single currency. He has wrested control of television in the Serb Republic and in the Muslim-Croat federation, Bosnia's two "entities", away from political parties. And he has forced the federation's parliament to pass property laws giving refugees the right to get back their homes.

After a shaky start (he invented an imaginary extra entity in his first press conference, and was target of American carping), Mr Westendorp seems to have righted himself. He learnt his brief and, to surprise of many, eclipsed Jacques Klein, a hyper-active American diplomat expected to do the real work a the High Rep's deputy. To flummoxed chauvinist, Mr Westendorp is "the dictator"; to those who delight in their discomfiture, he is the "governor-general", the "viceroy", even the "protector".

However firm the fist or silken the glove, though, Bosnia is far from working the way it is supposed to. Even after "full democratisation", its media still view the world through ethnic eyes. Only a handful of refugees have dared to return to homes in areas controlled by another ethnic group-the "main

setback” to Bosnian integration, admits Mr Westendorp. To western governments pumping some $9 billion into Bosnia (in aid and peace-keeping) every year, Mr Westendorp offers scant hope for an early exit: the need for foreign men and money will not slacken in the next two years, nor end, he reckons, for another 15.

To blame the High Rep for failing to heal Bosnia would be like blaming a doctor for an alcoholic’s backsliding. Bosnian politicians endlessly find ways around the laws he writes. He can try to enforce the law himself, but, as the passport mix-up shows, his minions do not know the terrain or the language well enough. Inevitably, an office staffed largely by short-stay diplomats form various western countries is full of factions and infighting. Mr Westendorp’s clout discourages Bosnians from governing themselves, but does not make him an effective substitute.

Some people think Mr Westendorp could do better. Their main complaint is that he spends too much time cultivating his fine tan and not enough in Bosnia. Mr Westendorp says that lobbying on Bosnia’s behalf with western governments keeps him away, though he admits that his family (young wife, young son) is also a lure.

And some of that lobbying may be on his own behalf. The European Union is mulling over who should plan its new common foreign and security policy, and Mr Westendorp is on every short list. His chances depend partly on unwritten but iron rules of country-and-party balance. One Spanish Socialist, Javier Solana, is NATO’s secretary general; another, Felipe Gonzalez, an ex-prime minister, wants to be the European Commission’s president. Spain’s left cannot run everything.

But Mr Westendorp may be helped by another European dilemma: whether to hire a career diplomat or a political heavy-weight to be “Monsieur PESC”, the acronym the French like for the EU’s future foreign-policy planner. Mr Westendorp, who spent

much of his career in the diplomatic service but was briefly foreign minister under Mr Gonzalez, calls himself a “hybrid”. That may appeal to European politicians, who are unsure how much clout they want Monsieur PESC to have.

If he gets the job, Mr Westendorp will be in familiar territory. Drawing a single foreign policy from the EU’s 15 clamorous governments may not be as tough as turning Bosnia into a single country, but Mr Westendorp has no illusions. Monsieur PESC will have to “co-ordinate different sensitivities”. Nor will he “make a revolution overnight”. But would Bosnia’s viceroy take the job? “I have never refused almost impossible tasks.”