

Article by the High Representative, Carl Bildt: "Extend the Brief on Bosnia"

Can it work? This is by far the most frequently asked question about the peace process in Bosnia. And can the countries contributing to the IFOR peace implementation force count on their troops leaving at the end of the year? The record after almost eight months of implementing the peace accord agreed at Dayton is a mixed one.

Mr Radovan Karadzic, leader of the Bosnian Serb entity, has been pressed into handing over all formal public party and party functions. But Mrs Biljana Plavsic, acting president of Republika Srpska, the Serb-controlled part of Bosnia, is talking about creating "an ethnic state" in terms which indirectly condone ethnic cleansing. Not until Mr Karadzic appears in The Hague to answer war crimes charges can the full normalization of relations with the Serb entity begin in earnest.

In the Moslem-Croat Federation, the other entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina, tensions remain between the two communities, as illustrated by the latest divisions over Mostar. The last remaining Catholic church in the Moslem stronghold of Bugojno was recently the target for arsonists, and there has been similar outrage against a mosque in Prozor, a Croat-held town.

But the positive signs are there. On Tuesday, the first train for 1,564 days travelled from Sarajevo to Mostar and on to the Adriatic port of Ploce – on lines rebuilt with European Union money. It was heralded by Mr Alija Izetbegovic, Bosnian president, as the second end of the Sarajevo siege. For all the inadequacies of economic policymaking and the slowness of international help, the cafés are opening, the farms are being cultivated and some factories are beginning to work. The first signs of economic revival are visible.

Bosnia is now heading for elections on September 14, and after the elections comes the crucial phase when the common institutions of the country will be set up and – I hope – start to operate. This is the most difficult and important part of the peace implementation this year – far more difficult than the separation of military forces and transfer of territory carried out by IFOR at the beginning of the year.

Election campaigns inevitably stress what separates rather than what unites. The chances of the election diminishing the influence of ethnic – based politics in the three communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina are approaching zero. And if there is any change in attitudes, it is a hardening of those which have driven the country to ethnic separation and ultimately war.

The common institutions that will be created after the elections – presidency, parliamentary assembly, council of ministers, central bank, constitutional court, standing committee on military forces – will work only if there is a reasonable understanding between the three communities and the two entities. This requires a more or less common understanding of the nature of the peace agreement.

Here, views are very different. On one side, there is the effort to interpret the agreement as a recipe for a unitary Bosnian state, with no real role for the two existing entities. On the other, there is a tendency to see the Bosnian Serb entity as practically independent and its boundary as a state border.

Neither of these interpretations is correct – the peace agreement sets up what is in essence a federal state. It will be a very loose and highly decentralised state with weak central powers for its common institutions – and thus unlike any other state in existence.

The centrifugal tendencies are obvious, and on occasions receive encouragement from Zagreb and Belgrade. It will thus require sustained international presence and pressure in the region to stop the Bosnian state from disintegrating during the first critical period of living together again.

One year is not enough time for the forces of healing and reconciliation to become more powerful than the forces of separation and revenge. As I made clear in my report to the UN Security Council, the involvement of the international community must last longer than the end of the year and extend beyond Bosnia. The French government has proposed a two-year period of consolidation, and the steering board of the Peace Implementation Council, which I chair, has started to discuss the period after 1996. In Bosnia itself, I am seeking agreement for

new all-Bosnia elections in September 1998, thus giving the country a two-year period to consolidate the peace and refine the national and international structures to support it.

Such a period of consolidation must in all probability be supported by a military presence in the country and the region – at least initially. It will leave at the end of the year, but on present trends a substantially smaller but very robust force will be needed to deter those thinking in terms of war again. Its composition must reflect the transatlantic coalition which – with Russian participation – is so actively pursuing the peace effort.

But a security presence is only one part of the overall commitment. The European Union must develop its “regional approach” to start making a long-term contribution to stability in the region by creating as free an environment for trade and economic co-operation as possible.

This would not only link the different parts of the area together, but also draw them into the long-term process of European integration. And it would give the EU more powerful leverage in Zagreb and Belgrade than now. In spite of all the problems, I believe the peace can hold, and the extremely ambitious goals of the peace agreement can be realised gradually. But the challenges are enormous.

What has been done so far this year has been simple compared to what lies ahead. It would be naïve to believe that those involved in implementing the peace agreement can just pack up and go home at the end of the year. If we are lucky we will have made a start towards building a genuine peace – maybe not much more. Nevertheless, that would be an impressive achievement after all that has happened to Bosnia over the four past years.