

Article by the High Representative, Carl Bildt: "Bosnia can have Free Elections"

Is Dayton a failure? Has the peace process stalled in Bosnia? These will be the questions on people's minds when the governments of the Peace Implementation Council meet in Florence later this week. I have two ways of answering.

One is to compare the newspaper headlines of today with those a year ago. Today I read of disappointments with the peace process, impatience with the pace of economic reconstruction, frustration about those parts of the peace agreement which have not been fully implemented. These criticisms are justified and felt particularly acutely in my office.

But a year ago this week the top news stories were of UN peacekeepers being held hostage, of the shelling of Sarajevo intensifying, and of preparations for the next offensive by the Bosnian Army to break the siege of Sarajevo – an offensive which failed incidentally at the cost of many lives.

It would be an exaggeration to say now that there are as many cafés opening up every day in Sarajevo as there were shells falling a year ago, but the mood on the streets has been transformed. Hope is in the air here and in cities across Bosnia.

The other way to answer is to admit quite openly that there is still a very long way to go, further than I hoped six months into the process. Indicted war criminals are still free in many parts of Bosnia. Radovan Karadzic is still poisoning the atmosphere of Bosnian Serb politics. A climate of fear inhibits freedom of movements between the two parts of Bosnia, and it has been darkened by a number of ugly incidents, mostly but not exclusively on the Serb side of the boundary. The media on both sides still use the rhetoric of war, with Pale Television and Radio often churning out propaganda of the most objectionable Stalinist variety.

However, the worst possible response would be to run up the white flag, say it is all far too difficult and announce now that there is no point in going through with the elections which are planned within the next three months according to the Dayton timetable.

I am still determined that Karadzic and all of the other indicted war criminals should be tried by the international court. For them, all roads lead to The Hague, end the sooner the better. If Karadzic has a case to put, as he says, he should have the courage and conviction to argue it in person.

But there is a separate provision in the peace agreement that indicted war criminals are not permitted to hold public office. This is of urgent concern to me, for Karadzic's clinging to office is preventing people from moving on from the psychology of war to the manners and language of peace. We have made some progress, both in making clear to the leadership that Karadzic has to go, and in persuading President Milosevic of Serbia to exert pressure to that end. The Florence meeting must send the message once more.

Elections in Bosnia will be more than usually important. It is of course vital that people have the opportunity to choose their own representatives, to create a new legitimacy. But even more pressing is the task of creating the joint institutions which are the only way of bringing the country together again after years of war. The longer we wait for the elections, the longer the forces of ethnic separation and partition will prevail.

My office cannot force people to live together and co-operate. Nor can 60.000 heavily armed troops, who cannot be expected to remain in anything like such numbers beyond the end of the year. But if we can give Bosnians the opportunity to work together in forging a decent civilised country, it will be a big achievement.

Of course it is possible that the conditions will be too dreadful, the level of violence and intimidation too high and the media are insufficiently objective for elections worth the name to go ahead. This judgement could still be made by the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, which will be supervising the elections. But I do not expect that on the basis of what I see in Bosnia today. Ordinary people in each of the communities have a hunger for peace and a deep desire for a return to normality. They realise that ethnic ghettos are not the path of the future. They want to move on. Bosnian politics are coming alive when given the chance, but the Bosnians need

reassurance and encouragement.

We in the international community can provide much of that support. A reward for peace in the form of money for reconstruction will help. So will assistance to the media, for instance in the field of television, and my office is already helping to create a new independent network based on existing Bosnian television stations. The continuing contribution of Ifor and the international Police Task Force will also be of the essence if secure conditions are to be assured for anything like normal political life.

I am not an irrepressible optimist, nor can I afford to be an uncompromising idealist. Bosnia, after all its savagery and sadness, has little room for either. Yet I have seen enough courage, decency and even wisdom here to believe that Bosnia can come through if it is given the chance. We on the outside, like the Bosnians themselves, must show this week that we can stay the course.