

Article by the High Representative, Carl Bildt: "Bosnia: Don't Delay the Vote"

The essence of the peace process in Bosnia is to gradually overcome the bitter partition of the country that is the devastating legacy of 42 months of brutal war. This is so not only because of the morality of the issues involved but also because any partition is unlikely to be permanent and is more that likely to inspire similar ethnic separation tendencies and conflicts throughout south-eastern Europe.

With the exception of Korea, there is hardly a country anywhere in the world as divided as the Bosnia that is now gradually moving from war to peace. Telephone lines are carefully cut, and although the visible checkpoints between the ethnic communities have been removed, the invisible barriers of fear continue to divide peoples from each other.

The Dayton Peace Agreement is the most ambitious peace agreement in modern history. It sets out not only to close down a bitter war, separate the armies and demobilise the soldiers but also to create a democratic and free society of a nature that has hitherto never existed in a region where autocracy and communism have dominated past generations. The human rights provisions in the peace agreement are superior to those found in most traditional European democracies.

It goes without saying that this transition will be neither easy nor straightforward. As with every other peace process, we must expect the Bosnian one to go from crisis to crisis as it gradually seeks to realise the ambitious goals set up. But as we have learnt from other parts of the world, a peace process gradually gathers momentum if it is sustained long enough.

Although the responsibility for the implementation of the ambitious political parts of the peace agreement rests mainly with the parties themselves, we must realise that without the active encouragement and determination of the international community, implementation will be extremely difficult. Were we to leave today – militarily, politically, economically – the country would hardly be able to overcome its partition, and the peace of today would be no more than a pause before the restart of the conflict.

As we approach the time when the chairman-in-office of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe will have to certify whether or not elections can be held within the time frame set in the Peace Agreement – Sept. 14 at the latest – many are questioning whether there really exist conditions for free and fair elections in the country. They see a risk that elections in September would bring back the nationalist politicians and forces – not least in the Serb Republic – which caused the war. And it is easy to point to the decisive victory scored by the nationalists in the last elections in 1990.

The risks are most certainly there. The architects of Dayton were very much aware of them. And conditions for elections are certainly going to be far from perfect by September, although they should be better than they are today.

But to delay the elections is to delay the setting up of the common institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina that are the core of the efforts to overcome the country's partition of the country. And the longer this is delayed, and the two parts of the country continue to operate as political systems foreign and indeed hostile toward each other, the more difficult and uncertain that process will be.

Today the political dialogue between the Muslim-Croat Federation side and the Serb Republika Srpska side is on a life-support system in the form of my efforts as high representative and the support by IFOR for each and every important meeting across the Inter-Entity Boundary Line. Although these efforts can bring certain results at times, it is certainly not the way in which the partition of a country can be overcome.

Following the elections, there will be set up a common three-person presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, which will nominate a chairman of the Council of Ministers to be approved by the directly elected House of Representatives. Although the constitutional provisions are both complex and vague, they represent the only possibility we have to get the different sides in the former war to sit down together and take a common responsibility for the future of their country.

Some have suggested delaying only the elections in Republika Srpska. But this seems to me to be an option even more dangerous than that of delaying all the elections. It would take pressure completely off the Bosnian Serb side, retain the power of the present hard-liners there, make it impossible to set up the common institutions and take away even the minimum of cross-entity political debate and dialogue that we might have in nation-wide elections. It seems to me a safe recipe for partition and eventual war.

The decision on whether elections will be held on time or not is not my responsibility. But when I am called upon by the chairman-in-office of the OSCE to give my views prior to his decision, I will urge a course of action that does not delay those efforts to overcome the partition of Bosnia that have already been delayed for too long.