

Article by the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown: "What I Learned in Bosnia"

After a decade of engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the United Nations mission is leaving at the end of this year. While the United Nations agencies will remain, the organization's responsibilities for policing will be taken over by the European Union.

History will look back on our engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina as the first faltering step toward a doctrine of international community. Bosnia will be seen as a new model for international intervention – one designed not to pursue narrow national interests but to prevent conflict, to promote human rights and to rebuild war-torn societies. We are already applying the lessons of Bosnia in Kosovo, East Timor and Afghanistan. Perhaps they will be applied in Iraq as well.

That is not to say that we did not make mistakes. We did. But these mistakes can guide us toward an even more effective strategy as we help other countries move from authoritarianism to democracy, from war to peace.

For example, in Bosnia we thought that democracy was the highest priority, and we measured it by the number of elections we could organize. The result seven years later is that the people of Bosnia have grown weary of voting. In addition, the focus on elections slowed our efforts to tackle organized crime and corruption, which have jeopardized quality of life and scared off foreign investment.

In hindsight, we should have put the establishment of the rule

of law first, for everything else depends on it: a functioning economy, a free and fair political system, the development of civil society, public confidence in police and the courts. We would do well to reflect on this as we formulate our plans for Afghanistan and, perhaps, Iraq.

Still, the United Nations role in Bosnia is one of the unsung success stories of the post-cold-war era. In 1996, after the establishment of the Dayton peace accords, the cynics said that refugees would never go home. Yet the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, working with other international agencies in Bosnia, has proved them wrong. More than a quarter of a million refugees – in a country of only 3.7 million – have returned to the homes they were driven from in terror.

The United Nations has also helped Bosnia establish a professional police service. In the early 1990's, the police in Bosnia were tools of terror, manipulated by the Bosnian, Serb and Croat war machines. Today, they work to prevent the sorts of crimes that trouble all societies. As the European Union takes on the police mission, it can do so confident that much of the preparatory work has been done.

In fact, one of the most important lessons we can learn from Bosnia comes from the dignified and considered United Nations departure. Intervention is always easier than what comes after it: stabilizing a postwar society and ensuring that the problems that prompted the intervention in the first place do not return. The United Nations stayed to help Bosnia rebuild. Our success is a reminder that the real work doesn't end when the soldiers leave – it's only just beginning.

The handover from the United Nations to the European Union marks a transition, not a withdrawal. The burden is, rightly and not before its time, being taken up by Europeans. Today, the European Union provides more than 9,000 troops, a market for Bosnian exports and tens of millions of Euros in annual

assistance.

This is a significant effort. It should not, however, obscure the fact that Bosnia cannot depend on Europe alone. While the American military presence has shrunk to slightly more than 2,000 troops, American political support and resources will remain crucial to the long-term success of the country's reconstruction.

Some have said that Bosnia's most recent national elections, which took place on Oct. 5, set the country back – that they were a vote for the nationalist parties who started the war and, as such, mark the failure of the international community's strategy in Bosnia.

I disagree. The vote was a vote against the nonperformance of the nonnationalist governing parties, not a vote for nationalism. Two of the three nationalist parties actually saw their shares of the vote decline, and the party that made the greatest gains was a nonnationalist opposition party.

We're not back in 1990. Next month it will be seven years since the Bosnian war ended. When the Dayton peace accords were signed, there were 430,000 people under arms; today there are 22,000. The foundation for a prosperous democracy is firmly in place. Now the challenge is to deliver effective government, stable institutions and honest leadership.

There were many who believed the Dayton accords would fail. After all, the peace initiatives in the previous three and a half years of terrible conflict all unraveled. But peace, however fragile, has prevailed. Europe can begin its new role in Bosnia certain that the United Nations has done its job.

Paddy Ashdown is high representative of the international community for Bosnia and Herzegovina.