

Article by the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown: "The bridge that leads to a better world"

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A British military helicopter crashed in Central Bosnia last week. The three-man crew were able to walk away from the wreckage, and the incident appears to have been caused by bad weather rather than anything more sinister; there has not been a single attack on international peacekeepers in the nearly 10 years of peacekeeping in Bosnia.

The European Union's peacekeeping force in Bosnia, EUFOR, is led by a British General, David Leakey, and the British military contingent is today, as it has been since the start of the peacekeeping exercise, among the most proactive in the multinational force. The helicopter crash has served as a useful (and thankfully un-fatal) reminder that Britain's engagement in Southeast Europe, and the engagement of our allies here, comes at a price.

Almost ten years after the end of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is increasingly clear that that price is worth paying.

Why are we in Bosnia?

After years of dithering, during which Europe stood by and watched the unfolding tragedy of "ethnic cleansing", the International Community intervened in 1995 to end the worst carnage on the European continent for half a century. In the years immediately after the war, the Bosnian authorities were

prevailed upon, through a combination of incentives and pressure, to consent to the return of refugees and the establishment of democratic institutions; at the same time the country's infrastructure was substantially restored courtesy of a US\$5-billion plus international aid programme.

Then a strange thing happened.

Europe began to understand that it could significantly advance its own interests by doing much more in Bosnia than simply putting a lid on the conflict.

It's not rocket science but it took us a while to work out.

We have two choices.

We can have on our doorstep a failed state (or several) run by criminal gangs who specialize in arms, drugs and people trafficking.

Or we can have on our doorstep a collection of parliamentary democracies whose people want to – and can – make a distinctive economic, social, cultural and political contribution to the rest of the continent.

Not a hard choice to make.

But the second choice has involved a sustained exercise in nation building, a long-term commitment.

When I took up my duties as the International Community's High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina nearly three years ago, I said that my task was to work with the people of this country to put it irreversibly onto the road to statehood and membership of Europe.

That's a project that makes sense not just for the people of Bosnia but for the people of Britain and the people of Europe as a whole.

Because if Bosnia is successfully rehabilitated, we will all gain.

Instead of an influx of crime we will have an influx of creative ideas; instead of an economic black hole in one corner of the continent we will have a promising trading partner.

Instead of chronic violence on our doorstep we will have enduring peace in the region.

The good news is that Bosnia 's rehabilitation is working. This is no longer the country whose agony we witnessed nightly a decade ago as news of unspeakable atrocities filled our TV screens. Peaceful parliamentary elections that fully satisfy Western standards of fairness and transparency are today the norm; more than a million refugees have returned to their homes; despite the decline of international aid, the economy is growing at a steady four to five percent annually.

If we can succeed in Bosnia , can we – should we try to – do the same elsewhere?

I have made it a firm practice not to try comparing the Bosnian experience with that of other post-conflict countries. We in Sarajevo are often exasperated by “helpful” suggestions on the way forward, made by pundits thousands of miles away. I imagine those in Baghdad and Kabul and elsewhere feel the same.

What I can say is that in Bosnia we learned (and it has been a tough learning curve)

- that the rule of law comes first; you can't introduce democracy in a climate of lawlessness (you have to tackle head-on the networks of corruption that are spawned by war)
- that a robust civil society – teachers, writers, trades unionists, religious leaders and the rest – is the

bedrock of democracy, but an all-powerful International intervention (or an intervention that is *perceived* to be all powerful) can undermine these people, sometimes even when it is trying to promote them

- that nation building is the logical corollary of military intervention. And nation building takes time, and money, and manpower.

What the Bosnian experience has made clear is that helping countries recover from the devastation of war isn't a matter of altruism; it is a matter of enlightened self-interest. There is a convergence of interest between Bosnia 's citizens and their counterparts throughout Europe . That convergence may well be detectable in other parts of the globe too.