Article by the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch:”Religion, the Hostage of Politics”

In an interview with Nezavisne Novine, the High Representative in BiH writes about the meeting of religious leaders and politicians from BiH in Coventry, *where the leaders of* the *Banja Luka religious communities* – Orthodox bishop *Jefrem Milutinovic,* the Catholic *bishop Franjo Komarica and* the *Mufti Edhem Camdzic signed a joint statement which binds them to further co-operation* in *healing the wounds inflicted by the war*

It happened throughout the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. You saw it on May 7th, 1993 when the Ferhadija Pasa Mosque in Banja Luka was demolished, and again eight years later, on May 7th, 2001. The violence that erupted that day, preventing the cornerstone laying ceremony at the site of the Ferhadija Mosque was intolerable. Murat Badic, one of those who was attending the ceremony, died as a result of the injuries he received that day. A little over a month later the cornerstone was laid, but only with the intervention of riot police who fought running battles in the streets with a violent mob.

If religion is to extract itself and play a positive role, a European role, then the leadership of the religious communities must be active. Reconciliation starts by taking concrete steps to fortify compassion, and trust between different communities.

The Meeting in Conventry

An example of this was when on September 24th Orthodox, Catholic and Muslim leaders, politicians from the RS – including Dragan Cavic the Vice-President of the RS – the mayor and representatives of the municipality of Banja Luka, business leaders and teachers gathered in the Centre for Reconciliation in Coventry in the UK. They embarked on five days of "Consultations" entitled "Steps Towards Peace, Prosperity and Reconciliation" organised by the British N.G.O. 'The Soul of Europe' and its founder the Reverend Donald Reeves.

Coventry itself is a symbolic place. On 14 November 1940, the City of Coventry was reduced to ruins by German bombs. Its Cathedral, at the heart of the city, burned. Despite this, the next day, the Cathedral's Provost pledged to go in peace to Germany when the war ended, stating that we are all guilty of hurting our brothers and sisters. After the war, a Cross of Nails, originally made from three medieval nails from the ruins, was taken to Kiel, Berlin and Dresden, and Coventry quickly established partnerships with these German cities. Coventry is a visible demonstration of reconciliation. Today, over 200 centres across all five continents are affiliated to Coventry, working for peace and reconciliation within their own communities.

On the final day of the "Consultations" the leaders of Banja Luka's religious communities – Jefrem Milutinovic, the Catholic bishop of Banja Luka, Monsignor Franjo Komarica, the Roman Catholic Bishop of this city, and Edhem Camdzic, the Banja Luka Mufti, signed a joint statement upholding the outcome of the discussions, which centered around the questions of refugee return, economic revival and a multi-ethnic society. In their statement read by Catholic bishop Jefrem, the religious leaders "insist that all permits for the reconstruction of all destroyed religious buildings of all faiths be issued as soon as possible in the region of Banja Luka, Republika Srpska and Bosnia Herzegovina" and made a commitment "to continue making decisions in joint actions to heal wounds created by the war".

The Soul of Europe brought together, for the first time, a multi-ethnic group of key individuals from Bosnia and Herzegovina – prevalently from Banja Luka – to address the problems of spiritual, social, political and economic renewal in this town; to present ideas in the fields of religion, local government, politics, business, culture and education for further consideration, and to develop plans to turn Banja Luka into a city truly at the heart of Europe.

This type of forum is a step in the essential process of reconciliation. I support all the proposals made, as did Zlatko Lagumdzija, Mladen Ivanic, Alija Behmen and other State and Entity representatives who gathered in Coventry to hear the results of the "Consultations".

One of the most shocking facts of the May 7th violence was that so many school children were involved. The RS Education Ministry subsequently removed six Banja Luka headmasters. But the heart of the matter is much deeper. It goes beyond removals, or providing a police cordon. What is required is a change of the mindset prevalent in the RS, which is left over from the dark war days, a change of heart.

To tackle this, religious leaders must take the initiative. They must bring the spirit of Coventry to Banja Luka and to the rest of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Concrete steps should be taken now. In schools, children must learn about others and be taught to appreciate their culture. This is already happening all over Europe, a continent that is increasingly multi-cultural and multi-religious. In this respect, Bosnia and Herzegovina, including Republika Srpska, has an enormous advantage over the rest of Europe: there is a common linguistic base, so one of the first hurdles is already overcome. Religious leaders should actively and publicly support return and the religious freedoms of others, welcoming back returnees and helping them to integrate in the old/new community. This is the European principle, vital if the exodus

of the young – currently two thirds of BiH's youth would leave if they could – is to be prevented.

Reconciliation Commission

Three days after the May 7th violence I, as the High Representative, called meetings with the President and the rest of the leadership of the RS in order to find a way to develop genuine democratic respect for human rights and different cultures. From these officials I demanded that a Committee for Reconciliation and Reform, made up of political, religious and civic leaders from Republika Srpska be set up and its role developed. This Committee, that so far has met only once, is charged with bringing suggestions and developing plans which will produce a truly multi-ethnic BiH. Given the importance of this task it must be more proactive in tackling the general malaise that pervades in many areas of Bosnia and Herzegovina with regard respect for basic human rights.

Reconciliation requires leadership and concrete steps. The events and crimes of the past must be confronted. Courts must work efficiently to safe-guard human rights. Police must provide security for everybody. The leaders must take measures and set examples so ensuring that the extremist-led mob rule that was witnessed this summer in Banja Luka does not occur again.