

Excerpts from the Speech at the Dinner hosted by HR Wolfgang Petritsch in Honor of President Alija Izetbegovic

Dear Mr. Izetbegovic, dear Guests,

I am delighted to welcome you here this evening to honour Mr. Izetbegovic on the occasion of his recent departure from the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina. I hope that we will have a chance this evening, as well as to look back on Mr. Izetbegovic's ten-year career, at the very top of Bosnian and regional politics, to also look to the future. I also hope you will enjoy the food!

Dear Mr. Izetbegovic,

No opening remarks could even begin to cover all that has happened in the last ten years, never mind the preceding years. However, permit me to say a few words, in your honour.

Before the collapse of Communism, you were one of the regime's most prominent victims in Bosnia and Herzegovina – and on several occasions were imprisoned for your religious beliefs. At your trial here in 1983, you were also accused of the "crime" of advocating the introduction of a Western-style parliamentary democracy.

There was to be but brief satisfaction for you.

In 1990 the SDA, SDS and HDZ dramatically and decisively swept the Communists from power. A full decade has now passed since you were first elected to the Presidency of the Republic of

Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Tragically, the euphoric days when the SDS, SDA and HDZ tied their flags together and formed the first truly democratically elected government of Bosnia and Herzegovina were quickly forgotten. The clouds of war gathered over Bosnia as the Yugoslav crisis unfolded and in neighbouring republics it was often difficult to know who was a friend and who was foe.

Together with President Gligorov you made a last ditch effort to head off the crisis by presenting a plan to reform and confederate SFRY. To no avail. It didn't take long before Bosnia's fate was hanging in the balance. The Cutileiro plan was signed and then rejected.

What followed were three and a half years of terrible war and aggression against Bosnia and Herzegovina and its people. Your Islamic Declaration was misquoted by your enemies and used to fan the flames of an ethnic-based politics you yourself rejected as an aberration from Bosnia and Herzegovina's multicultural heritage.

I read this week with pleasure your interview with the French philosopher, Bernard-Henri Levy, in which you repeated that the idea of Bosnia is a European one. You said: "We are European Muslims. We are also attached to European moral values. The idea of Bosnia was, and remains, a European one."

Above all, despite the war, despite the fact your own home town now rests in Republika Srpska, despite the continued violence against returnees, you said: "There is a chance for reconciliation."

You stayed with your people – Bosniaks, Croats and Serbs – throughout the brutal siege of Sarajevo. I recall vividly your painful statements throughout the war, decrying the madness nationalism brought to this beautiful city and the rest of the country. Your strength of character and determination shamed the International Community into taking concrete action to put

an end to the unspeakable slaughter here in the twilight of a bloody twentieth century.

You have said you were not a politician and perhaps this was the main ingredient of your success. Politicians are all too quick to forget morals and you could never be accused of this. In this respect, your religious beliefs have undoubtedly provided you with the moral backbone to get through the darkest times of the war.

What is perhaps most difficult for all those engaged in public life is the knowledge that the final judgement does not come in one's lifetime. Your name already peppers recent works of history on the Yugoslav conflict. But time must elapse, a certain distance must be established before history does its work.

What history will not fail to record for posterity is that you had the dignity and humility to step down from office. The two other principal actors in the Balkan drama of the last decade have met Shakespearian ends. Croatians had to wait in great uncertainty for the death of their leader – Serbians took to the streets to get rid of theirs. There could be no greater contrast with your departure, a model for a region which aspires to return to Europe, where it truly belongs. I pray that the character of your departure will set a more peaceful tone for the region in this, the dawn of a new century. And after all the hardships you have suffered, your secret hope of leaving office after Tudjman and Milosevic has been granted, with the dignity you deserve.

However, I think we can be frank with each other – you would expect nothing less from me. Ten years later Bosnia has yet to resolve many of the problems it faced when you first took office ten years ago: low and irregular pensions, heavy unemployment and a struggling economy. Much work remains to be done for Bosnia and Herzegovina to be a prosperous and stable state. Many of those who suffered most during the war are

still missing loved ones. Too many families here are waiting to return to their rightful homes.

Their continued search for a dignified life and their plight must not be forgotten.

Since taking up my post as High Representative last summer we have had an open and honest dialogue, where our disagreements were few and far between. I very much hope this dialogue will continue and I thank you for all your help.

Stepping down from the Presidency of course does not mean stepping out of public and political life. The leadership of one of the most influential political parties remains in your hands and in this capacity we, the international community, look to you for continued assistance and guidance in implementing the peace agreement.

The hardships you endured in prison and under fire more than entitle you to slow your pace. But I ask you again to continue your efforts to guide Bosnia and Herzegovina towards reconciliation and a lasting peace.

I wish you all the very best in what is a new chapter in your life. I am sure it will be as full – and challenging – as the previous ones.

Photos from the dinner are available at the OHR Press Office in Sarajevo. Please contact Nidzara at: (033) 283 942.