

High Representative Suspends Decision Renaming Sarajevo International Airport

The High Representative today announced a Decision to suspend the decision renaming Sarajevo International Airport.

He said that in the coming ten days he will announce a procedure to ensure that all of Bosnia and Herzegovina's international airports can only be renamed after broad consultation and approval by competent BiH institutions at the state level.

At the same time, he sharply condemned as "offensive" a letter released by Presidency Member Paravac today to the High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, Secretary-General of the Council of the EU Javier Solana.

Following the Decision, the High Representative made the following statement:

"I am announcing today a Decision I have taken after a great deal of reflection and thought, after close consultation with my colleagues on the Peace Implementation Council Steering Board.

It is one of the most difficult Decisions I have taken in my time here, for as everyone knows, and as I said at his funeral in October 2003, I have great respect for Alija Izetbegovic, whom I regarded as a friend and whom I acknowledged as the father of his people and recognized as a brave and resourceful leader of his country.

As you are aware, several key ambassadors have today already expressed their deep concern about the recent decision to rename Bosnia and Herzegovina's main international airport and

the airport that serves its capital. I have discussed this issue with them this afternoon, I have today decided to take the difficult, but necessary Decision to suspend the renaming of Sarajevo International Airport.

The decision to rename Sarajevo International Airport, in a multi-ethnic country like Bosnia and Herzegovina that has been through a tragic war, will not contribute to the reconciliation process, but rather will undermine it.

It will not add to the respect for Sarajevo as BiH's capital, it will diminish it; it will not help in the commercial development of BiH's premier airport it will damage it.

If Bosnia and Herzegovina's international character is to be beyond dispute, its international airports must be named in a manner that ensures they are beyond dispute in the country as a whole and have the support of all the constituent peoples and Others. Our international airports are the international face of the country, which means that their naming should reflect basic consensus on which BiH, uniquely, is founded.

If we want to build the multi-ethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina that Alija Izetbegovic always told me was his dream, then we have to recognize that it is too early for a decision such as this. Some day I hope and believe that the time will be right for this decision – but that time has not yet arrived.

The main airport of a country, in particular when it serves the capital city has a unique and special significance. Citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina, regardless of where they reside in Bosnia and Herzegovina and their ethnicity, have a right to land in their capital, at an airport which represents a consensus and which makes them feel proud and pleased to come home.

My original view was that this was a decision best left to the domestic authorities. But these domestic authorities have

completely ignored advice given at the highest level to reconsider what was potentially an unwise decision and I now fear that the consequences could undermine the smooth running of BiH institutions.

For these reasons, I have today decided to suspend the decision on renaming the Sarajevo International Airport.

In the next ten days I will be announcing a new procedure to ensure that all of Bosnia and Herzegovina's international airports can only be renamed in a transparent manner, with genuine consultation and with the approval of a competent BiH institution at state level that includes representatives from all constituent peoples across Bosnia and Herzegovina.

I cannot finish this statement without condemning in the strongest terms the letter released this afternoon from President Paravac to the High Representative and Secretary General, Dr Solana. This letter is offensive, contentious and highly inappropriate to send to Dr Solana. I hope that President Paravac will reconsider and withdraw his letter.

As I said of Alija Izetbegovic at his funeral on October 22, 2003, "It is not given to many to achieve such things in a single lifetime. And it is given to none who are ordinary."

My opinion of Alija Izetbegovic has not changed one iota since then. However, I am obliged to take care of the interests of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a whole, including those institutions that define its international character, when the political establishment of this country has so clearly failed to do so.

I am aware that this Decision will be very unpopular to some and very unwelcome to many. But I do this in interests of all the citizens of this country and in the clear belief that this is the right thing to do."