

High Representative Welcomes Further NATO Engagement in Streamlining BiH Armed Forces

Rapid economic, political and military reform is a prerequisite for normalising Bosnia and Herzegovina and preparing the country for membership of NATO's Partnership for Peace Programme as well as promoting further integration in European structures, the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown, said on Thursday. The High Representative was speaking in Sarajevo at a meeting with NATO Secretary-General George Robertson and representatives of the North Atlantic Council, NATO's principal decision-making body.

Commenting on the recent resignation of Mirko Sarovic as a member of the BiH Presidency, to take responsibility for the ORAO Affair and the RS espionage scandal, the High Representative said that a breakdown in civilian supervision of the RS armed forces had occurred because of systemic weaknesses. Some of these, he said, had been addressed through remedial measures imposed by the High Representative on 2 April, but further steps must be taken. Some of these, such as a State Ministry of Defence and a single chain of command at State level, would possibly go beyond Dayton. But if BiH wanted to join NATO they would have to be adopted.

"Major reforms are needed urgently to overcome deficiencies in civilian supervision of the armed forces and to make BiH a credible candidate for Partnership for Peace in accordance with the pledges made by BiH's leadership in January 2003," the High Representative said. He highlighted three reforms which must be completed before the end of this year:

- Structural changes strengthening State-level institutions, including an increase in the budget and personnel allocated to the Standing Committee on

Military Matters;

- Legal changes at State and Entity level putting in place effective State-level civilian command and control over BiH's armed forces. This will be the work of the Defence Reform Commission, which is now being set up;
- Restructuring of the armed forces, including downsizing and destruction of surplus weapons.

The High Representative suggested that NATO might consider appointing a temporary representative in BiH charged with supervising the work of preparing the country's armed forces for PfP participation.

On the fight against organised crime – a core element in the overall reform process – the High Representative said one of the messages of the Southeast Europe Co-operation Process summit in Belgrade earlier this week was that regional rather than country-specific initiatives are most likely to succeed. "There is a growing recognition that organised-crime figures and war criminals are intermingled and that both groups present a real threat to the future of the region as a whole," the High Representative said. "Encouraging greater regional co-operation in this field is an essential element in tackling this criminal scourge effectively."

The High Representative briefed the NAC on progress made since he took up his duties in BiH on 27 May last year. He noted that, after a period of intense public debate, the main political parties had agreed to the overarching principles that will guide the establishment of a single customs service and a countrywide VAT system in BiH. He explained that the Dixon Commission is currently working through the legislation needed to implement these crucial reforms. Meanwhile, the Bulldozer Committee has been an effective spearhead for coordinated efforts to get rid of outdated, job-destroying legislation that discourages the investment that the BiH economy desperately needs.

The High Representative also briefed the NATO representatives on progress made in overhauling the BiH justice system, and he commented on the reform of the Council of Ministers, noting that “dispensing with the eight-month rotation of the BiH prime minister has brought a significantly greater measure of cohesion to this country’s government.”

On the new government’s performance, the High Representative reminded his listeners that “before the last elections, all of the mainstream parties endorsed the Jobs and Justice Agenda, which was presented by the BiH authorities to the Peace Implementation Council.” This, he said, represents a detailed blueprint for reform in the economic and rule-of-law fields “and we will not relax our efforts to ensure that the new administrations fulfill their electoral promises and implement this programme.”