Speech by the HR, Carlos Westendorp, at the “Sarajevo Return Conference”, 3 February 1998

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all here this morning, and to thank all those who have worked so hard to put this conference together, and to my co-hosts, Bob Gelbard and Herman de Lange, and other colleagues, for travelling a long way to be with us.

Our conference is called – rightly – ‘Sarajevo returns’.

Sarajevo is indeed returning:

- returning to life;
- returning to the European mainstream;
- returning to its status as a thriving cosmopolitan city.

Two years ago this city symbolised hope over despair, decency over barbarism, tolerance over enmity.

That is what Sarajevo stood for then.

And that is what Sarajevo stands for today.

And if there is one message that I want to go out from this conference to this city, to this country and to the world beyond, it is that Sarajevo is indeed:

- a multi-ethnic city;
- an open city;
- a tolerant city.

A city which stands for the best of Bosnia, a capital city for and of all of Bosnia’s peoples.

A city whose name is a synonym not just for endurance and perseverance, but for reconciliation too.

A city which has laid down its arms and opened its arms.

That is the message today, a message from the heart, from the heart of this country.

This is the first conference on this scale in Bosnia and Herzegovina to discuss how best to promote returns of minorities to their homes. But it will not be the last. Because returns to Sarajevo today must also mean returns tomorrow to Banja Luka, to Brcko, to Drvar, across the country, throughout the region.

But it is right that the first such conference should take place here in Sarajevo, the capital.

It is Sarajevo which must take the lead in this business, and it is Sarajevo which is taking the lead. And where Sarajevo leads, I urge others to follow.

What are our aims today?

I want us to make a solemn commitment to large numbers of minority returns, but also to discuss seriously how that is actually to be achieved.

It is easy to talk grandly and to sign up to lofty principles. But lofty principles mean little if they are unworkable in practice.

So let us concentrate on the practicalities as much as the principles; on how we intend to accomplish what we all agree to be worthwhile goals.

Because it is no good insisting on the right to return if the conditions are not right for return.

It is no good asking people to come home unless they will feel

at home when they get here.

And it is no good returning one family to its home only to return another family to the street.

One of our main aims today is to ensure that that won't happen.

Let us today set clear targets, but let us say equally clearly how we intend to achieve them.

Let us aim during 1998 to return to Sarajevo at least 20,000 non Bosniacs who lived here before the war.

An ambitious target, perhaps. But it need not be an unrealistic one, given the serious commitment of all of us present today.

It will require the whole-hearted commitment by the Sarajevo and Federation authorities to:

- guarantee equal treatment for all ethnic groups in civic and economic life;
- to adopt fair laws on property and housing rights;
- to apply the Amnesty Law and to exempt from military service for at least five years those who come back here;
- and to adopt simplified registration procedures.

You will need to take other practical steps:

- to ensure that returning children not only have places at school, but that whilst in the classroom, they learn tolerance not tension, to get on with their fellow Bosnians, not to get even with them;

You will need actively to promote enterprise and investment to create jobs for those returning.

You will need to stop employers from discriminating against

returnees.

You will need to step up your search for multiple occupancies, and to give more support to the Real Property Claims Commission.

If you do all these things, if you fulfill your side of the deal, then the international community will do all it can to help you.

The presence of so many distinguished representatives of the international community here today demonstrates that beyond any doubt. Between them, they control access to many cheque booksÖ

If you live up to your commitments, if you make real progress, then the rewards will be substantial.

Sarajevo has already benefited hugely from international assistance in recent years.

Sarajevo stands to gain even more, if you live up to the pledges you make.

The more you can return pre-war inhabitants to their homes, the more goodwill you will generate, the more powerful an example you will set, and the more your international friends will be willing to help you.

If, on the other hand, rhetoric does not match the reality, the opposite will happen.

The assistance will dry up, the reconstruction aid will cease, the infrastructure projects will grind to a halt.

So I guess what I am saying is this: that it is up to you, Sarajevo.

You have before you a great opportunity. It is up to you whether you take it.

I do not for a moment deny the difficulties involved. I do not downplay either the emotional obstacles, or the physical ones. You will need magnanimity and resourcefulness in industrial quantities.

There will be plenty of pundits who shake there heads and proclaim: this is impossible, the goals are unrealistic, it will never happen.

But to them I say just this:

– is it really so difficult, is it really so impossible for this city of all cities, the city of Sarajevo?

We know what the people of this city managed to achieve in wartime.

Is what we are asking in peacetime any more difficult than what you did then?

Speech by the High Representative, Ambassador Carlos Westendorp
03 February 1998