OHR’s Statement at the International Agency’s Joint Press Conference

High Representative in Mostar

The High Representative, Paddy Ashdown, is visiting Mostar today. This afternoon he will meet young people and spend time working on a small family farm.

The High Representative will meet representatives of 11 non-governmental organisations and informal groups who have banded together to create a youth centre in the ruins of prewar facility in Abrasevic, on the former confrontation line. After months of lobbying and demonstrating by the organisers, who do not have any conventional party-political affiliation, the City Authorities granted them a one-year contract, which is still to be signed, allowing them to use this abandoned space. Though its circumstances remain tenuous, the Abrasevic Centre demonstrates that when citizens band together they can make their politicians act in a way that benefits large numbers of people rather than a well-connected few. This kind of growing assertiveness of civil society in BiH was originally spearheaded by the Bulldozer Initiative. The OHR supports the work of the Abrasevic Centre and congratulates its organisers on their determined efforts. At the conlusion of his Mostar visit, the High Representative will also speak to young people at an open forum to be held at the Nansen Dialogue Centre.

OHR Economic Newsletter

The OHR has just published its economic newsletter for the third quarter of 2003. The main characteristic of the last quarter has been the promise of a significant improvement in the BiH business environment. As Principal Deputy High

Representative Donald Hays points out in his introduction to the newsletter, “we may be witnessing the beginning of a change in the mindset of serious politicians that is essential for real reform. The authorities are beginning to display the kind of pragmatism and focus that can get basic building blocks of a positive business environment in place. If this is sustained it will open the way for investors and entrepreneurs to transform the BiH economic landscape and deliver real benefits to citizens, in terms of employment and services.”

These improvements in the business environment – details of which are in the newsletter – include the Council of Ministers’ adoption of the draft Law on the Indirect Taxation System, which has now been submitted to the BiH parliament; the setting up of a Working Group, under the aegis of the Coordination Board for Economic Development and European Integration, to find solutions to the legal and administrative obstacles that have bedevilled privatisation until now; and the package of legislative reforms announced by the Entity Prime Ministers in the wake of the telecom audits, which are aimed at curbing fraud and mismanagement at public companies.

These positive developments should be viewed in conjunction with the governments’ current efforts to keep the promises they made during the summer, when they endorsed the 131 reforms laid out in the Mrakovica Action Plan. These reforms have to be implemented by the start of 2004. Progress made so far indicates that there is now a window of opportunity for real reform that will help small and medium sized enterprises grow, attract investment and create jobs. The International Community is working with the authorities to ensure that this window is not closed.