Speech by the Rt. Hon. Paddy Ashdown, High Representative in Bosnia and Herzegovina, to the International Rescue Committee

‘Broken communities, shattered lives: winning the savage war of peace’

Introduction

Last week, my wife Jane and I spent a night with a displaced Bosnian family in their home near Visegrad.

It’s a breathtakingly beautiful spot, high in the mountains, with the Drina river tumbling through the valley a couple of thousand feet below.

Together with our hosts for the night – the Setkic family – we sat sipping tea, watching the sun go down, barely noticing the clouds gathering menacingly on the horizon. The Setkics live in a now decrepit UNHCR tent.

Within a few minutes, we were in the middle of one of the most severe hail storms I have seen.

The hail stones went straight through the canvas of the tent, punching holes in it as though it had been strafed by machine gun fire. We were in for a damp night.

Ahmed and Sibisa Setkic, in their mid-seventies, are refugees from Sarajevo, two of the 2 million refugees and internally displaced spawned by the Bosnian war. For Ahmed, this is the third time his house has been burned down. The first was in

1941 by the Germans. The second was 1944 by the Ustase; and then in 1992, by the Serbian paramilitary warlord, Arkan. He was the worst. He left nothing behind him alive – neither woman, nor child nor animal.

Nevertheless, two years ago Ahmed moved back, cleared his land, planted meagre crops, cleaned his house and started patiently scraping together the resources to rebuild it. And they are still at it, eight years after hostilities ceased.

Ahmed and Sibisa's plight, like that their country, no longer features on our television screens or on the agenda of key international meetings.

The world's attention has moved on.

First there was Kosovo, then East Timor, then September the 11th, then Afghanistan and now Iraq.

But in Bosnia, the slow, unglamorous business of winning what Kipling called "the savage war of peace" continues, day in day out, year in year out; and with each step, so does the parallel task of strengthening not just the security of Bosnia, but of the region, and the wider world.

The problems faced by the Setkic family in that valley on the other side of Europe demonstrate the gargantuan scale of this task; the time it takes to complete; the need for a steady and enduring application of will and resources; the vital role of the international community

They also offer a small example to politicians and policy makers around the world of what foreign policy means at the basic human level. A reminder of why, as we embark on yet another exercise in building peace after war – this time in the Middle East – we must learn the lessons of the past, and learn them quickly.

I will want to return in a moment to some of the lessons we

might be able to draw from Bosnia for Iraq, and for other similar missions that inevitably will follow. But before I do so, let me say a word about how we are doing in Bosnia itself.

Progress in Bosnia

There are plenty of sceptics about.

They look at the difficulties Bosnia still faces, from getting its highly complex government structures to function, to the formidable economic challenges, to the rise of organised crime, and they conclude that it is all hopeless. We have given it our best shot, they argue, and nothing has changed.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Observing progress in Bosnia is a bit like watching grass grow. You have to go away and come back at decent intervals to notice it.

But, after years of heavy-duty international engagement, the country is in far, far better shape than it was when the Dayton agreement was signed. And when one considers the trauma of that war, it is frankly little short of miraculous how much has been achieved.

The worst is behind us in Bosnia and Herzegovina. With a few exceptions the issues we deal with now are not those of conflict, but increasingly the reassuringly familiar challenges of transition, which Hungary and Poland and the other new European democracies have already overcome.

We have to finish the task of course. But if we do so, and I am confident that we shall, we will have demonstrated in Bosnia that it is possible to create a durable peace, even out of the rubble of a vicious ethnic war.

Eight years ago, Bosnia lay torn shattered and near fatally wounded by a four-year war in which a quarter of a million of

its four million population lay dead, as Milosevic and Tudjman bartered over its territory. Today Tudjman is dead, Milosevic is in The Hague, and their countries are focused, not on territorial expansion, but on European integration.

At the end of the war, Bosnia had three armies and over 400,000 men under arms; today there are only 16,000 soldiers left, and, by the end of this year, they will be brought under a single system of command and control.

Then, Bosnia had three secret services. By the end of this year, it will only have one.

Even after the Peace Agreement was signed, it would have been unthinkable to travel freely all over the country. Now that is taken for granted.

By the time the fighting stopped, most of the housing stock was heavily damaged. Today the bulk of it has been repaired, and all the utilities are functioning.

Eight years ago, Bosnia was in economic turmoil with no universally accepted currency. We now have a central bank, a stable currency and one of the lowest inflation rates in the Balkans.

And, perhaps the greatest achievement of all, a million of those burned, raped and brutalised from their homes have now returned. We have made a reality, in Bosnia, of a fundamental human right that elsewhere, tragically, only existed on paper—the right of refugees to return home.

We have set a standard and established a precedent. War will never be the same again. Some good has come out of evil.

So progress has been made.

If you come to Sarajevo, as thousands now do each winter for the skiing and each summer for the International Jazz and Film Festivals, you will see some bullet scarred houses to be sure.

But you will also see teaming cafes and restaurants, modern homes, and all the accompanying paraphernalia of domestic European life, from garden centres to DIY stores. It's all a far cry from the days when I used to be smuggled through the tunnel and whisked down 'sniper's alley' in an armoured personnel carrier amid the thump of artillery fire, and the crack of rifle shots.

Slowly but surely, Bosnia is becoming a 'normal' country.

It may take time to do, but we are stitching back together what Winston Churchill called the 'sinews of peace'.

Which is why a family like the Setkics are right to hope that they will succeed and their children will, eventually, be able return to the family home.

To be sure, Bosnia still faces huge problems – problems that appear all the more complex and intractable when viewed through the distorting lens of a three-way ethnic prism.

We have more to do, particularly to establish the rule of law and to transform the economy, which is why, when I arrived in Bosnia a year ago, I said my priorities were Justice and Jobs.

But again, out of the glare of the world's media, a lot of hard work is beginning to pay off.

After six years of intensive work, the UN has completed the Herculean task of downsizing, training and certifying the police. The new European Union Police Mission will now see the process through to completion.

We are reforming the judiciary and restructuring the court system.

Together, International and Bosnian lawyers have written new, modern criminal and civil codes that will make it easier to convict the guilty and protect the innocent.

We have beefed up our international criminal intelligence and investigation capacity to assist the police in going after the high level criminals.

And we have created a Special Chamber in the new State Court, staffed with international as well as Bosnian judges and prosecutors, to take on organised crime.

Just last month, this new Chamber took on its first case – the biggest human trafficking trial in Bosnia's history.

On the economic front, we are doing away with the existing indirect tax system, so loved by the criminal and the corrupt, in which different administrations collect different taxes, at different rates. With the help of the European Commission, we will soon have one modern, transparent tax administration to deal with Customs, Excise and a single system of VAT.

And we are tackling the big, structural, supply side reforms that all transition countries have had to tackle, from labour market reform to privatisation, from bankruptcy courts to public administration reform.

Lessons for elsewhere?

What we have seen in the last few years in Bosnia, and in the Balkans as a whole, is that it really is possible to turn things around. But it requires a marathon effort over many years.

Until recently, of course, so-called 'nation-building' was derided in some quarters as naïve and expensive international 'social work' – Hackney Council on a global scale. The reality is quite the opposite. 'Nation-building' was always a misnomer – we can't build nations, in the sense that the international community can't impose the emotional ties and patriotism that nationhood implies: those develop naturally or not at all. But we can – and we must – help failed states build governing structures that work, because if we don't,

those failed states easily turn into warring states or terrorist havens. Changing regimes is not enough; we have to leave behind something better than came before. The teams now re-building Iraq, or Afghanistan, are as much part of the war on terrorism as the B52s or the carrier battle groups.

We have been become good – very good – at winning the short, sharp, hi- tech wars of the last two decades. We can now do it almost by numbers.

But we are far less good at the hard, patient, resource-consuming task of building the peace that follows.

Perhaps there are signs that this time the coalition's swift victory in Iraq has started to change that.

The day after Baghdad fell, the telephones in Sarajevo were ringing hot.

My office lost count of the number of calls wanting to know what pointers Bosnia could offer for the task ahead in Iraq.

It turned out that regime change, to misquote Winston Churchill, was not the end, not even the beginning of the end of the matter in Iraq. It was merely the end of the beginning. It was plain that the next stage would, in its own way, be every bit as challenging and sometimes as dangerous: and so it is proving.

So what can our experience in Bosnia and elsewhere offer for Iraq, and for any future missions of that type?

I acknowledge, of course, that the two countries are very different.

We need to be as wary of trying to build the last peace as we should be of fighting the last war. Every situation is different.

Iraq is over ten times bigger than Bosnia. There the war

lasted less than 4 weeks; in Bosnia it lasted 4 years.

In Bosnia, nearly all the houses were damaged and much of the infrastructure destroyed. In Iraq, the level of damage has been, proportionately, far less.

Four years of war in Bosnia spawned thousands of war criminals, many of whom are still at large today. Twenty-five years of the Baath party regime will have inflicted a different kind of trauma on the Iraqi people, which will have to be addressed in a different but equally resolute way.

And perhaps most importantly of all, Bosnia, rich in natural beauty, has never been rich in natural resources. Iraq on the other hand is sitting on the second largest oil reserves in the world. The financing of its reconstruction is secure in the long-term, and does not depend exclusively on international charity.

So the differences are great.

But some ingredients are common and some broad lessons worth considering.

Principles for peace-making

There are, I would suggest, seven broad principles – the seven pillars of peace making – that apply more or less universally.

The first principle is the importance of having a good plan and sticking to it. This plan needs to be drawn up, not as an after-thought, but well in advance, as an integral part of the planning for the military campaign. Because the switch from war fighting to peace-building can happen, literally, overnight. Indeed in Iraq we have seen how the two can proceed almost simultaneously – how troops can be engaged in high intensity conflict one moment, then policing the next, then supervising humanitarian hand-outs and then, at a moment's notice, switch back to war fighting all in a matter of hours.

It’s very tough for them. These are new skills most soldiers are neither trained for nor used to. But they are skills soldiers are now going to have to learn, for in the early, crucial days in the savage war of peace, until the police arrive and the administrators roll in, everything depends on them.

In Bosnia, we had no such plan for civil reconstruction when the war ended. Indeed it is only in the last few months that we have finally drawn up a Mission Implementation Plan, setting out clearly what we are trying to achieve, how and by when.

It is easy in the chaotic aftermath of conflict to get buffeted from pillar to post, and to lose sight of the key strategic goals. We need to get as good at planning the post war period as we are at planning the war itself.

The second principle is the over-riding priority, as we have discovered in Bosnia, in Kosovo, in Afghanistan and now Iraq, of establishing the rule of law – and doing so as quickly as possible. The first hours are crucial.

Crime and corruption follow swiftly in the footsteps of war, like a dark shadow. They seep into the space that wars leave almost as the last firing stops. If the rule of law is not established very swiftly, it will not be long before crime and corruption infect the body politic, contaminate its organs, choke off its resources and threaten its chances of recovery.

This, above all was the mistake we made in Bosnia. We oversaw some major failures at the outset, as the Sarajevo suburbs were forcibly cleared by Serb paramilitaries under the eyes of NATO peace-keepers.

We failed to quell the reprisal attacks on Serbs in the early weeks of NATO’s presence in Kosovo, which has had a profound effect on the mission ever since.

And we are plainly encountering similar difficulties in Iraq, despite the heroic efforts of the troops on the ground.

It is much more important to establish the rule of law quickly than to establish democracy quickly. Because without the former, the latter is soon undermined.

In Bosnia, we got these priorities the wrong way round. Perhaps it was because we wanted to get out quickly and we thought elections would help us hand over power and go.

So we insisted on six elections in six years, with the turn-out falling at each one; but in that time we have barely been able to put six major criminals behind bars.

Now we are starting to win this battle for the rule of law in Bosnia. But it is tough, because we are fighting an entrenched enemy that reaches into every corner of politics, government and the state. And it is much tougher than it would have been if we had made the rule of law our number one task in the first year, rather than in the sixth.

The third lesson is that it is vital to go in hard from the start. On the military side, that means establishing your credibility straight away. The more robustly a peacekeeping force deals with any initial challenges to its authority, the fewer challenges there will be in the future. It means having enough troops at the outset, and scaling down as things improve. We had 60,000 in Bosnia at the start. Now there are 12,000, and next year there will be fewer.

On the civilian side, going in hard means starting off with the powers needed to get the job done, rather than having to acquire them later.

In Bosnia my predecessor, the former Swedish Prime Minister Carl Bildt, famously arrived in Sarajevo with a briefcase full of cash, a handful of staff and that was about it. He had to beg, borrow and steal to get his mission off the ground. He

worked wonders; but it was not until after he left that the international community invested his successor with the tough – some would say Draconian – executive powers that the High Representative in Bosnia now possesses.

These include the power to impose legislation and remove officials and politicians obstructing the implementation of the Peace Agreement. Before this, international officials were in the absurd position of having to negotiate even the most minor issues with all three parties to the conflict, often with the very people who had been both the master-minds of the conflict and its profiteers.

It is better to start off with strong powers, the sooner to relinquish them, than to start with weak powers and to have, too late, to strengthen them.

The fourth principle is that it is vital to start as quickly as possible on the major structural reforms – from putting in place a customs service or reliable tax base, to reforming the police and the civil service, to restructuring and screening the judiciary, to transforming the armed forces. Long-term success always depends on these fundamental reforms: the sooner they are embarked upon, the sooner they will be completed.

It is also vital – and this is my fifth principle – that the international community organises itself in theatre in a manner that can work and take decisions. You can't re-build war torn communities by committee, nor by remote control from several thousand miles away. It has to be done by the people on the ground, and they have to be empowered – and trusted – to drive the process forward.

This may mean – as in Bosnia – more frequent use of coalitions of the willing. I happen to believe that we have stumbled in BiH on an ad hoc arrangement that works well. I report to a Steering Board of the Peace Implementation Council –

essentially the key countries involved in implementing the Dayton Agreement.

The Office of the High Representative was established at Dayton as an ad hoc institution charged with supervising civilian implementation of the peace agreement. The NATO-led Stabilisation Force – SFOR – has responsibility for military and security implementation.

I report twice a year, to the UN Security Council, through the UN Secretary General, but am not formally accountable to them.

The OHR was created outside the UN family as a matter of political expediency, but this arrangement has over time displayed certain advantages.

- It brings with it flexibility in operating, reporting and funding.
- It allows greater freedom of maneouvre than is accorded to our sister organisation, UNMIK in Kosovo, which is directly accountable to UN structures and has frequently, in the past, been subject to micro management on a five thousand mile screw driver from New York
- The powers accorded to the High Representative – more sweeping than might have been accorded to a UN Head of Mission – have proved indispensable in maintaining the effectiveness of this temporary post.

These features have enabled successive High Representatives to respond quickly and decisively to a broad range of situations that have arisen in the course of peace implementation.

The sixth principle is the importance of an exceptionally close relationship between the military and civilian aspects of peace implementation. Civilians depend on the military if they are to succeed, and the military depend on the civilians: both need each others' skills. Civilian administrators need to know they can count on military support as and when they need

it. They need to be able to take on extremists, confident that the military will be there to back them up. And they need the military's help, in everything from mine clearance to ensuring a safe and secure environment for tasks ranging from exhumations to refugee return. This is an area where we have made immense progress in recent years: the military are now much better attuned to the needs of the civilian administrators. The experience British and American troops have had on the streets of Banja Luka and Brcko, in everything from patrolling, to small -scale economic goodwill projects, are being put to good use in Baghdad and Basra.

The final lesson is perhaps the most important.

Indeed it ought not to be a surprise to us at all, since it proved the case after the World War II with the Marshall Plan, and it has proved the case in every major conflict since.

The fact is that building things up takes much longer than knocking them down.

That is true – literally true – of buildings, of homes, of bridges, of power stations.

But it is even more true of institutions – of professional police forces, of independent judiciaries, of courts, of civil services, of legislatures and executives, of free and responsible broadcasters and newspapers, of an active civil society.

Installing the software of a free and open society is a slow business. It cannot be done – as we initially claimed in Bosnia – in a year or so. So we should avoid setting deadlines, and settle in for the long haul. Peace-keeping needs to be measured not in months but decades. In Bosnia, after almost a decade, we are nearing success: but it has taken a huge commitment.

The last American Commander of the NATO-led Stabilisation

Force in Bosnia, who became a close and much admired friend, used to have a wonderful Texan word for it.

'What we need here', he used to tell me ' is sticktoitiveness'.

That's exactly what we need – in Kosovo, in East Timor, in Afghanistan, and in Iraq: the political will, the unity of purpose, and the sheer stamina as an international community to see the job through to lasting success.

That means staying on, and sticking at it, long after the CNN effect has passed.

Television has become very good at prodding governments to intervene; but it is less good at staying around to make sure they finish the job.

Bosnia and the EU

We have not yet finished that job in Bosnia, although we are making, as I have described, steady headway.

But finish we must.

It is often said that if we withdraw too soon, we put our whole investment at risk. And that is true in so far as it goes.

But what we really need in Bosnia is not a withdrawal strategy; it is a transition strategy. And that is, perhaps, the eighth principle. If peace-building is to succeed, to take root, to become irreversible, it needs a political destination. For Iraq, that may be a democratic and prosperous state in a peaceful and secure Middle East. For Bosnia, it is Europe.

Bosnia, like the rest of the Balkans, is part of Europe.

What happens in that part of our continent has a direct effect

in other parts of our continent.

We are in the same geographical and political boat.

So the political choice facing Europe is clear: either we export stability to the Balkan region or, as we have seen already, the Balkans will export instability to the rest of Europe.

It is as simple – and as stark – as that.

That is why, in Bosnia, and in the rest of the Balkans, the role of the European Union is of such cardinal importance.

The prospect of membership of the Union is perhaps the most powerful force available to us for projecting stability.

We have seen across Central and Eastern Europe what a transformation that prospect can bring about.

It was not inevitable, when the Soviet Empire collapsed, that its aftermath would largely be free of conflict and bloodshed.

That – with the tragic exception of the Balkans – the process was largely peaceful is due in large part to the twin stabilising influences of NATO and the European Union.

The Union has stood like a magnetic pole, towards which the ex-Communist countries from Estonia to Slovakia were able to set their compasses and steer a steady course of reform.

Today, most of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe are on the very threshold of membership.

The Western Balkan are now embarking on the same journey, towards the same destination. But they do so with the advantage of having had the route charted and the dangers marked by others who have gone before.

Tomorrow, I will travel to Thessaloniki for the European Summit. That meeting, organised by the Greek Presidency, will

bring together the leaders of the Western Balkan countries with their EU counterparts.

It is an important occasion, because it will offer a chance to the EU to demonstrate conclusively to the Balkan countries that it wants them to join the Union once the have met the necessary standards – no ifs, no buts.

I hope that that message will go out loudly and clearly from Thessaloniki. Because it has not always been heard – or indeed said – as clearly in the past as it might have been.

I recognise the domestic political pressures some EU governments are under on the whole question of enlargement. But Europe bears a special responsibility in the Balkans – for its past, and now for its future.

We cannot change the Balkans' history.

But we can – and we must – help to determine the region's future.

That will require leadership. It will require continued financial commitments on a substantial scale. It will mean maintaining political interest, especially as new and exciting priorities crowd the international agenda.

It will mean making sure the European Union is equipped to take decisions in real time, on issues that ultimately have a direct bearing on its own security. It will mean mobilising all the leverage at the Union's disposal, from the Stabilisation and Association process, to visa bans against those supporting indicted war criminals, to trade policy, to budgetary assistance.

We are using all these instruments much more proactively than in the past, in large part due to the tireless efforts of Javier Solana and Chris Patten, who have done more than anybody else to make the EU an effective reality in the

Balkans.

But there is still room for improvement.

The process they have started has to be completed. It still takes too long for a plethora of committees in Brussels to take decisions with the speed required by people in the field. There is still too much arcane institutional theology in place of bold and decisive action. There is a still too much institutional rivalry, and not enough sense of operating as a single integrated team. This all hinders, sometimes severely, but always frustratingly, the EU's ability to bring its – potentially immense – political clout to bear, even in the Balkans where there is, unlike in Iraq, a genuinely common European policy, and one that is largely shared on the other side of the Atlantic.

A final thought.

Why are we seemingly endlessly condemned to re-inventing the wheel when it comes to peace keeping? If, as I suspect, peace making is going to be a key element in the exercise of power in the modern world, is there not a case for creating some formal training facility for the world's politicians, diplomats and soldiers, which could also act as a repository of best practice and tribal wisdom in the field? Increasingly, we are finding that these are transferable skills. Just look at the CVs of the people being called on to serve in the civilian administration in Iraq. Bosnia, Kosovo, East Timor, Afghanistan. They crop up again and again, with good reason.

Conclusion

The challenge for us now in Bosnia is keep up the pace. To finish what we have started.

We, the international community, have made our mistakes there.

Nevertheless, we have stuck at it. And this, coupled with the courage and extraordinary qualities of the decent people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, has meant that, despite it all, we are in reach of a time when Bosnia can begin to make its own way in the world as a normal and stable country.

It would, however, be a tragedy to add to Bosnia's tragedies if the painful lessons we have learned there over the last seven years were to be ignored as we struggle with similar problems elsewhere.

For Ahmed and Sibisa Setkic, in their patched up tent on a Balkan mountainside, I believe we are at last beginning to win the savage war of peace in their small country.

I can do no better than hope that we can win that war with fewer errors and greater effectiveness for the tens of thousands of others like them elsewhere in the world.