

The High Representative meets the Inter-Religious Council

Today the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, met with leaders of the four religious communities of BiH; Cardinal Vinko Puljic, President of the Inter-Religious Council, the Reisu-l-ulema, Dr. Mustafa Ceric, Mitropolit Dabrobosanski, Nikolaj Mrdja and President of Jewish Community BiH, Jakob Finci to discuss restitution, an important issue given the implications this has for the religious communities of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The discussions were open and frank. The High Representative stated that he believes the religious communities in BiH should take an active role in rebuilding Bosnia and Herzegovina. The people of BiH have suffered too much and for too long; they need moral and spiritual guidance from their religious leaders.

The High Representative explained why he was recently obliged to annul restitution laws in the Republika Srpska stating that the political leaders in BiH must ensure that laws are economically viable and in the best interests of the vast majority of BiH's citizens. OHR staff in previous meetings with Republika Srpska officials, have stated that restitution programmes that lack financial resources and proper procedures to ensure that each claimant's right to due process under the law are fundamentally flawed and a disservice to the citizens of this country.

The High Representative informed the religious leaders that BiH cannot attempt to return property to former owners at the expense of innocent people who also have a legitimate interest in that property. Occupancy right holders, university students and families struggling to make ends meet, should not be made to suffer because of past wrongs. If former owners were not

paid adequate compensation for their property that was nationalised, in some cases fifty-five years ago, methods of compensating these former owners should be examined in a realistic and professional manner. OHR experts will assist in that study.

In the final analysis, the wealth and future of BiH rests with its people. The international community and the political and religious leadership of BiH must join together to ensure that the people's rights to homes, jobs, education and other basic human rights are realised.