

Address given by Max van der Stoel (Vienna, 22 June 2001)

Caption: On 22 June 2001, Max van der Stoel, OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities since the post was first established in December 1992, gives a farewell address to the Permanent Council after eight years in office.

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Staying on the Path to Peace

Address to the Permanent Council by Max van der Stoep, High Commissioner on National Minorities (Vienna, Austria, 22 June 2001)

Mr. Chairman,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you very much for convening this special meeting. And thank you for your kind words.

I want to begin by thanking you for your support, not only today but throughout my period as High Commissioner. I have worked quite independently in the past few years, but I was only able to do so in the knowledge that I had your backing. Whether it was through the Permanent Council, Ministerial Meetings or Summits, I was always given the support that I needed to carry out my mandate. In turn, I tried to keep you informed about my activities and to alert you to any inter-ethnic tensions that I thought required your attention.

I have worked with nine Chairmen-in-Office during my period as High Commissioner. I have particularly fond memories of my work with the Swedish Chairmanship in 1993. That was my first year as High Commissioner and at that early stage we were learning by doing. The Swedish Chairmanship gave me the latitude to get on with the job, and the support to do it. I am grateful to the subsequent Chairmen-in-Office who have maintained this.

The same holds true for the Secretary Generals with whom I have worked. In the early days of the OSCE's institutional development, Wilhelm Höynck was always a friend who I could turn to for advice and support. Ambassadors Aragona and Kubis followed in his footsteps, allowing me the freedom to run my own shop, but providing me the tools to do it.

My most important relations have been with the governments of those states in which I have been active. Notwithstanding the fact that I was sometimes critical of their policies, governments usually co-operated with me and considered my recommendations in a constructive spirit. There was mutual respect, even if we could not always agree. All States that I wanted to visit gave me the access that I sought. There was only one exception, but I hope that this will be a temporary one.

I will not hide from you the fact that this job has not always been easy. I recall that former Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev said to me once (I believe it was the first time that my term was renewed): "My condolences on this decision. You will be criticized on one side by governments who see you as being too sympathetic to minorities, and you will be criticized by minorities for not fully representing their views".

Kozyrev was right. I have been vilified by extreme nationalists from majority communities for being a foreign agent, insensitive to majority concerns, or a catalyst for the destruction of the state. Minority extremists have accused me of being a fellow traveler of the government, applying double standards, and selling short the minority case. And these minorities and majorities are often in the same country, talking about my approach to the same issue. I have had to repeat again and again that I am the High Commissioner 'on' rather than 'for' national minorities. This is a vital distinction and I have constantly emphasized it because of the importance that I attach to even-handedness.

I have based my work, particularly my recommendations, on the firm footing of international standards. These standards, like the OSCE's Copenhagen and Moscow Documents or the Council of Europe's Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities, are not punitive documents designed to pressure states into taking decisions that go beyond reasonable limits. They are basic standards, drafted by Governments and agreed to by consensus, which have been established because of the common interest in protecting the rights of persons belonging to national minorities. These are blueprints for guaranteeing human rights and preventing inter-ethnic conflict. That is why I have emphasized to many of your

Governments that my recommendations are made in the spirit of co-operative security. Governments should not live up to their commitments for the sake of appeasing the international community or placating minority demands. Governments should see the selfinterest in protecting minority rights and living in peaceful and prosperous multi-ethnic states. The only people who profit from inter-ethnic conflict are nationalist entrepreneurs. That is not a business that reaps long term profits. In the end, intolerance, violence and instability hurt us all. The last century, indeed the last decade, have shown us how high the cost of unchecked nationalism can be. We must therefore remain vigilant against the threat that extreme nationalism poses to human rights and security.

This leads me to a more general remark, namely the importance of conflict prevention. Mankind has spent centuries perfecting the art of war. We are still in our infancy when it comes to building peace.

The OSCE is one of the few organizations which is devoted to conflict prevention. Having been involved in the CSCE process since Helsinki, I am struck by the fact that we have managed to devise mechanisms and institutions to promote better relations among states and to build security within states.

But the OSCE is still a work in progress and, to my mind, always will be. We have to remain flexible to cope with the challenges of the day.

I maintain that preventing inter-ethnic conflict will continue to be one of the organization's biggest challenges in the near future. Despite improvements in many OSCE states, conflicts still rage and tensions boil below the surface. We have to sharpen our tools and invest sufficient resources to ensure that we remain on the cutting edge of conflict prevention.

My mandate has been to provide early warning and to take early action to stop national minority issues from spiraling into conflict. As I noted earlier, my work is only successful when you are standing resolutely behind me. There are limits to what the High Commissioner can do on his own. Collectively, we must do more to act in response to the warning signs. It is not enough to admonish States for falling short of their commitments. A concerted response by the international community must be resolute, targeted, and timely. If we do not respond effectively to the early signs of trouble, precious time will be lost. And sometimes so much damage is done in the interim that the possibility of preventing conflict becomes very slim indeed. We can not afford to do too little too late.

Let me reflect briefly on the situation in Macedonia. I think that the international community is guilty of not having focused enough attention or dedicated sufficient resources to heading off this crisis in time. Perhaps this was because there were so many other things that demanded attention in the Balkans and elsewhere. I recall that some people thought that I was a Cassandra when I warned that the situation was fragile in Macedonia. It is also no secret that initially I had difficulties in raising money for the University project in Tetovo.

Then when the crisis erupted, there was a flurry of activity. Suddenly everybody was interested in Macedonia, and more money for the University became available.

To me this is symptomatic of a recurrent problem, namely that low level conflicts do not grab adequate international attention. When a crisis becomes acute, everyone wonders what went wrong or what steps should be taken to contain the situation. Things do not need to get to that point. Inter-ethnic conflicts are not natural disasters that can be monitored but not prevented. Inter-ethnic conflicts are not inevitable and they can be made tractable.

The key is to understand the roots of the problem at an early stage and seek ways of addressing differences in a peaceful and constructive way. We should also learn the lessons from previous conflicts in order to be more aware of the warning signs of future ones. A difference of opinions should not have to erupt into violence before we do something about it.

Targeted funding for projects can address some of the basic needs and interests of minority communities and

contribute to conflict prevention. While Foreign Ministries seem to be increasingly sensitive to the benefits of relatively limited funding, Treasuries are still hesitant to invest in preventing the conflicts of tomorrow. We need to put our money where our mouth is. It makes political and financial sense to put resources into keeping multi-ethnic states together, rather than bailing them out after they have fallen apart.

Of course, there are occasions when, for one reason or another, conflict prevention is not successful and we have to move on to crisis management. It is hard to identify exactly when that threshold is passed. For example, in Macedonia part of crisis management consists in efforts to revive inter-ethnic dialogue which is so essential for preventing the crisis from breaking out into full-scale civil war. I think that we have to be flexible and pragmatic when we find ourselves in the gray area between conflict prevention and crisis management.

Mr. Chairman,

To conclude I would like to recall an excerpt from my acceptance speech from the Stockholm Ministerial in December 1992. I said that "in many ways I will have to explore a path which has not been trodden before - a path moreover, that might sometimes be quite slippery". Well, it has been quite a trek. The path has been long and winding, sometimes overgrown and, at times slippery. But once I started walking, I got my bearings and it became easier to anticipate possible pitfalls. With experience I became better acquainted with the rules of the road. Although the footing was not always sure and there were many occasions when I didn't know what to expect around the next corner, I did my best to keep my balance and to stick to my path.

I could not have come this far without your support and assistance. Many words of praise have been spoken today. I am grateful for them. But please remember that this has not been a one-man show. What has been achieved was only possible because I had a devoted, highly talented and creative team around me.

With the advantage of hindsight and an excellent team to assist him, my successor will be able to learn from and build on my experience. I hope that you will give Mr. Ekeus the same support that you have given me over the years. We must continue, indeed strengthen, our commitment to preventing conflict in the OSCE area. It is essential for peace within States, co-operation between states, and for the security of Europe as a whole.

Thank you and all the best.