

# **Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe**

## **Practicing what we Preach: Early Action to Prevent Conflict**

Intervention by **Rolf Ekeus**

OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities

Helsingborg, 29 August 2002

Mr. Chairman,

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Earlier today we have identified common values which should be guiding us in our efforts to prevent conflicts. This afternoon we will discuss how these values could be shaped and implemented into common action.

To define and agree upon these values is a good beginning, but immensely more challenging is to make these values real in environments where there is an actual potential for tensions, violence and even war. There is no dispute in the international community that prevention of conflict is essential, but the real question we are facing is how to move from this insight to effective action.

To establish an instrument for action in the area of conflict prevention was the philosophy behind the creation of the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities in 1992. After the end of the Cold War, it became increasingly clear that, in contrast to the massive inter-state wars during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, contemporary conflicts are generated more from internal tensions and frictions *within* states, between different groups - based on ethnicity, religion or language - frequently in the context of majority-minority relations. Colliding interests of States are today normally not allowed to develop into armed conflict. They are contained by the help of diplomacy, negotiations, mediation, efforts which are supported by a multitude of institutions.

The High Commissioner is expected to engage himself for the precise purpose of addressing potentials for conflicts within states. To that end, his mandate has been tailor-made for him to take direct action to prevent inter-ethnic tensions from developing into frictions and even full-scale violence, which could spill over into international conflagration.

The HCNM experience is that the key to prevent conflict is that warning signs *can* be identified early enough and that there *is* a point in the conflict cycle where effective intervention can significantly reduce the threat of potential instability. One has to be ahead of the curve. To enable this early assessment, detailed knowledge and reliable information is vital. The first signs of a potential crisis can often look like a minor development, but could sometimes, if not addressed properly, rapidly develop into a full-scale problem. As HCNM I therefore have to look for indicators of possible problems in the specific case. I have to enter into concrete situations and directly address different issues by meeting face-to-face with all relevant parties, not only those who advocate the official position but with the opposition, representatives of minority groups, local leaders and all other people affecting the majority-minority relations in a country.

Every situation is specific, but the experience of the HCNM shows that certain common denominators reappear. In inter-ethnic relations, problems around education, language use, participation in the political bodies and the executive as well as culture, property, citizenship and repatriation often are key questions to address. However, in the specific situation, other issues can be the ones where one needs to find compromises or solutions. The point is to identify those issues which are in dispute and address them by actively assisting in finding viable solutions through mediating efforts and by giving concrete and workable proposals for settlements.

Additionally, my role as High Commissioner is – when a solution cannot be found - to make use of my special access and information generated by the network of contacts and consultations, to issue early warnings, whether formally or through quiet diplomacy, to the international community in order to draw their attention to the situation at hand.

Unwillingness, or even inability, of ethnic groups to live together in peace and mutual respect can bring suffering and hardship to many in addition to political turmoil and tensions with serious national or international repercussions. To the international community and the local parties the easy way out in such situations may seem to be a separation of the conflicting groups by dividing a State into separate entities according to ethnicity. What then often is forgotten is that a policy of separation brings with it a number of new problems and difficulties, such as new constellations of majorities and minorities emerging inside the new entities. Furthermore, if an economically viable State would be broken up and new borders drawn, this could create a hotbed for international conflict, especially if such a development would be accompanied with ethnic cleansing. The dream of ethnically pure nation States carries with it the threat of forced separation, uprooting and deportation.

Policies of separation run counter to the fundamental principle of integration, a cornerstone of the OSCE approach to international security. From my point of view, integration does not mean assimilation. It means living together in harmony, with tolerance and mutual respect for differences as regards culture, religion, language and historic perceptions. Integration in a multiethnic society of such differences is difficult and challenging. But it is an absolute necessity if the forces for separation and conflict would not win out.

In the regions where I am engaged - Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Baltic States, as well as the Balkans and Central and Eastern Europe – other international actors are also involved. We all have our different mandates, many of them more or less related to conflict prevention. Some are addressing economic development needs, others are focusing on such problems as refugee return or prevention of crime and illicit drug trafficking. With our common efforts of addressing some of the causes of conflict, there are potentials for working together, using our specific expertise, cooperatively and complementarily. It is vital to have a

coherent and co-ordinated approach to make best use of our respective resources, increase our leverage and to avoid unnecessary overlap. In this common endeavor, I, in accordance with my mandate, have to pay special attention to the political dimension.

The efforts by the European Union and High Representative Javier Solana to find an integrated solution to the Serbia-Montenegro situation is one example of how constructive early action may prevent deterioration and destruction. The activity by my predecessor Max van der Stoep, together with other members of the international community, with regard to countries such as FYROM, is another.

The special skills the HCNM can bring to many similar situations are his local presence and contacts in confidence with those directly affected by ethnic tension, the message and methods of integration he can deliver and the experience of applying international norms situations acquired since my predecessor took up this office in 1993. With joint action of the international community, each institution, injecting its specialty, can contribute to the common goal.

To summarize, I believe that there is space for more practitioners in the type of work that I carry out. I note that other regional organizations are looking at the OSCE experience and considering how a High Commissioner-like institution may best suit their needs. I am aware that there are discussions about strengthening the capacity of the United Nations to better identify and respond to pre-conflict situations. I hope that the European Union will continue its efforts to enhance its conflict prevention capabilities. I am convinced that there is much we can achieve through our own efforts and together.