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SRSG Michael Steiner addresses Permanent Council of the OSCE

VIENNA—SRSG Michael Steiner told the OSCE's Permanent Council that the reality of the situation in Kosovo has improved further than many people's perception. He praised the OSCE for playing a central role in transforming Kosovo into a place where all its people can live in security and dignity.

"Kosovo has now entered the crucial stage of transferring authority to Kosovo's Provisional Institutions of Self-Government and the most important recent development is that a Government has been formed and the institutions have begun working. Of equal importance is that the Government is multi-ethnic, with a Serb minister for Agriculture and Rural Development and a Ministerial Coordinator for Returns," he said.

He praised the Kosovo Assembly for last week passing its first piece of legislation, on pensions. The SRSG noted that this practical step marked a welcome change from last month, when the Assembly made a declaration about issues beyond its competence.

SRSG Michael Steiner told the Council that Kosovo now needs to progress in three broad areas: Returns, Multi-ethnicity and Integration of Minority Communities; Economy and Privatization; and the Rule of Law. Progress in these areas will be measured against 8 sets of specific Benchmarks that have been endorsed by Security Council and Kosovo's Assembly. He praised Prime Minister Bajram Rexhepi for embracing the principle of "standards before status" and explained that the benchmarks are now being converted from external measurements to internal goals.

He said that of all the benchmarks the most important is the rule of law because everything else depends on it. While the rest of UNMIK is downsizing, the Justice budget is increasing. The addition of well qualified and thoroughly vetted Kosovo Serbs as judges and prosecutors will soon make the judiciary truly multi-ethnic. The Kosovo Police Service now has 4,770 officers out of a final full strength of about 6,300. SRSG Michael Steiner said he hoped to see the KPS in North Mitrovica soon.

He repeated his pledge to have zero tolerance for crime and corruption. He also noted that violent crime has decreased dramatically: from 245 murders in 2000,

to 136 in 2001, and in the first six months of this year Kosovo has seen 34 murders – 32 Albanians, 1 Serb, 1 Bosniak.

SRSB Steiner said the OSCE plays the central role in municipal elections coming up in October, for which 72 political entities have so far applied for certification. Last Saturday, Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Nebojsa Covic endorsed Serb participation. Minorities being represented in the municipalities will facilitate an increased rate of sustainable returns. He also praised Kosovo's Assembly for adopting its "Resolution on the rights of communities and their members and on the conditions for the return of internally displaced people and refugees."

SRSB Steiner rejected the notion of politically driven returns, enclaves and clusters and said that sustainability means equal access to public services like water, electricity, schools. Italy donated 3.5 million Euros for public services in Peje/Pec and Germany contributed nearly a million Euros for projects in Klina.

On Mitrovica, SRSB Michael Steiner repeated his vow: No partition, no illegal, parallel structures. Normal policing is key. He thanked Gen. Marcel Valentin, KFOR Commander, for supporting this position. Mr. Steiner announced that Mr. Covic had agreed there should be no funding for parallel structures.

Repeating that Kosovo is not an island, the SRSB reviewed the concrete achievements of his trips to Tirana, Skopje, Sarajevo, and especially Belgrade. He pointed out that his negotiations in Belgrade had resulted in the release of 106 Kosovar Albanians from Serbian prisons; agreements on railways and license plates that will facilitate travel outside Kosovo; and the return of the 6,000-year-old Goddess on the Throne. He also mentioned that FYROM has agreed to recognize UNMIK travel documents and license plates and has cooperated in ameliorating the impact of border adjustments on Kosovans living close to the border. Mr. Steiner hailed the success of the regional cigarette conference in May and the Pristina Declaration calling for cooperation on labeling, tax rates, sharing information. Last Saturday UNMIK police seized 20 million cigarettes in the north.

Mr. Steiner concluded his address by saying that while things are getting better in Kosovo, the ice is still thin and Kosovo is not yet self-sustainable. To continue Kosovo's progress, the SRSB urged the OSCE to remain closely engaged.