

INTERVIEW

War crimes are just one of Croatia's problems

By Zoran Radosavljevic

ZAGREB, Oct 28 (Reuters) - Croatia must cooperate with the United Nations war crimes court if it wants to join the European Union, but human rights and judiciary reform were just as important, a top Western monitor said on Tuesday.

Peter Semneby, who heads the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) mission to Croatia, told Reuters in an interview it would be "unfortunate if all attention focused only on one issue and other were relegated to the background".

Zagreb applied for EU membership in February, hoping to start accession talks next year. But progress has been hurt by poor cooperation with the war crimes tribunal, most notably the failure to arrest an indicted general, on the run since 2001.

"Other issues perhaps require even more attention, because they are in many ways more profound, require commitment not only from the political establishment but all of Croatian society, over a long period of time," Semneby said.

The issues include improving conditions for the return of Serb war refugees, now living mostly in neighbouring Bosnia and Serbia, minority rights and the reform of the judiciary.

All of them form the political criteria Croatia -- still burdened by the legacy of its 1991-95 independence war -- needs to meet to progress towards EU membership.

SLOW JUDICIARY REFORM

A paramount concern remained the slow reform of the judiciary, which Semneby said was "bogged down in a number of trivial cases".

"Judicial reform is the key to many other reforms, a key condition for economic reforms, the key to creating confidence and trust in Croatian economy, necessary for investments. It is also a condition for the refugees to be able to repossess their houses," he said.

He said strengthening the local judiciary was also important to give the country a stamp of international credibility, needed for trying future war crimes cases at home.

"Handling of war crimes in domestic courts will become increasingly important," Semneby said. The tribunal plans to end all trials by 2008.

He said some local trials -- in which Serbs were sent to prison on dubious evidence or Croatian soldiers were acquitted on charges of killing Serb civilians -- were "miscarriages of justice".

"There will be more and more war crimes cases to be handled locally and they will be more scrutinised by Croatia's international partners than ever before."

Semneby said the outcome of the November 23 parliamentary polls should not threaten Croatia's democratic record, regardless of the winner -- the ruling reformist alliance or a more nationalist conservative bloc.

"Most of these things do not seem to be controversial issues in the election campaign. That gives reason to be fairly confident that whatever the result of the election, it will not significantly change the situation," he said.

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Tuesday, 28 October 2003 06:35:13