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SRSG Meets Albanians and Serbs in Viti/Vitina Municipality

PRISTINA---SRSG Bernard Kouchner's "Outreach Initiative" continued yesterday with his visit to the Viti/Vitina municipality in the Gjilan/Gnjilane region, followed by a visit to Vrbovac, one of the three Serb villages of the municipality where Dr. Kouchner inaugurated the first Local Community Centre.

In a Town Hall meeting in Viti/Vitina, the SRSG told a large gathering of people that "In Viti/Vitina, you have understood that tolerance is the only answer for the future of Kosovo. Making peace and building tolerance requires more courage than fighting a war. The new battle for Kosovo is the struggle for peace and you in Viti/Vitina are in the forefront of this struggle".

He said if elections are successful, if they are open, fair and democratic, the people of Kosovo will show to the rest of the world that they are ready for the next stage, which is to gain substantial autonomy as provided in Resolution 1244. Responding to questions on independence of Kosovo raised by the inhabitants of the municipality, the SRSG said that the "next stage is of self-governance. We, the international community, understand your will for independence but I cannot give independence. I am responsible for substantial autonomy. Remember that we have fought for you, with you. So we do understand your concerns, but you have to understand us. So don't blame the international community for not giving what you expect because we have proved that we are your friends".

After the meeting in Viti/Vitina, the SRSG proceeded to Vrbovac, where he inaugurated the Local Community centre in the presence of Mr. Nenad Kojic, the mayor of Vrbovac. The centre was built following the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between the SRSG and Bishop Artemije on 29 June 2000.

The SRSG then visited the local school in Vrbovac, where he met representatives of the Serbian and the Croatian communities. These representatives conveyed to the SRSG their main concerns, mostly related to freedom of movement, lack of a fair judicial system and access to job opportunities. Dr. Kouchner said he understood their difficulties regarding freedom of movement, but it would take time to change this situation. "But I am confident that here in Kosovo, it will be faster than in any other peacekeeping mission", Dr. Kouchner said. He also said that he had appointed international judges and prosecutors to provide fair trials to the detainees in Kosovo.

This municipality has around 3,800 Serbs and a small number of other minorities, like the Croats (out of 782 before the war, only 52 are left now).