At the time of writing, I am halfway through my term as Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE, and I can already conclude that 1999 has been the most challenging year in the history of the OSCE. It has been the year of our largest field mission to date, and it has been the year of one of the worst human catastrophes that the OSCE and the rest of the international community have ever faced. In terms of the numbers of people expelled from their home country and the level of brutality, the Kosovo crisis has exceeded our worst fears. The media was on hand to bring us immediate evidence of the atrocities suffered by the Kosovar-Albanian people, and new evidence is now surfacing showing that both sides to the conflict are guilty of war crimes.

Indeed, we failed to contain the Kosovo-crisis, but this was due to a political leadership in Belgrade which openly, deliberately and blatantly violated the OSCE commitments, which are important values governing the international community. Now our task is to rebuild a multiethnic and democratic Kosovo, in fostering tolerance and reconciliation, in building modern democratic societies. But we must not look at Kosovo in isolation from the rest of Yugoslavia. We must also make sure that the whole country can recover from the suffering inflicted under the authoritarian leadership of Mr. Milosevic. Our aim is to help Yugoslavia to become a free and democratic participant in European politics, and to stabilise the Western Balkans as a whole.

The OSCE is a lean and cost-effective organisation. The secretariat employs only about 150 people. But even though it is small, relying on the active support of its members, it has proven its ability to rise to the challenges facing it, and to respond with dynamism and vigour when called upon. The deployment of the KVM last autumn was the biggest field operation ever launched by the OSCE and our new mission to Kosovo will be a large and complex one. These operations show that the OSCE is a flexible organisation, able to take on manifold urgent tasks. They also demonstrate the pressing need to upgrade our secretariat in Vienna. It is far from becoming a large international bureaucracy, and the modest adjustments that we want to make will not jeopardise its profile as a small and inexpensive organisation.

The Kosovo crisis is not the only situation we are dealing with in the OSCE, but it is a reminder that failure to prevent conflict is what creates headlines. We must take action in time, before conflicts become brutal and devastating wars. Responsibility for the Kosovo crisis lies of course with Mr. Milosevic, and not the OSCE. My point is that successful long-term conflict prevention and crisis management initiatives tend to attract less attention, and
less is known about them. I would therefore like to mention some of the success stories of the OSCE. These are stories that have not received much coverage in the international press, but they are significant because they have contributed to European security and stability.

The Baltic area is not an area of instability and crisis. Its transformation and adaptation after the fall of the Soviet Union is a European success story. This is of course mainly due to the policies and efforts of the countries in question, but the significance of the OSCE’s contribution to the integration of the linguistic minorities in Estonia and Latvia should not be underestimated. This integration has been a prerequisite for the stability that now prevails in this sub-region. The OSCE was also politically useful to the Baltic States and to Russia with regard to the military stabilisation of the area following the 1992 Summit in Helsinki. The closing down of the Skrunda Radar Station in August 1998 was the latest successful step in this context.

The post-conflict rehabilitation of Bosnia and Herzegovina is another challenging task. I feel that this country’s prospects are improving by small but significant steps. It is not easy to build a democracy based on the rule of law in a war-torn country in which ethnic groups that have recently fought against one another now have to find a way to live together. But I believe that we will succeed over time in making the democratic institutions work. The time has not yet come for us to hand over all political responsibility to the leaders and institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. But as the new political order of the country matures, that time is approaching.

Central Asia is a region in which the OSCE is stepping up its commitments. The organisation is a vital link between Central Asia and Europe, and we have already intensified our level of activity in the five states by establishing OSCE centres in all of them. The Oslo Ministerial Council has asked me to present a report before the summer on the enhancement of OSCE activities in Central Asia as well as on co-ordination with other international organizations present in the region. By the time this issue is in circulation, the report will have been presented to the Permanent Council in Vienna and its implementation will hopefully be well under way.

The Southern Caucasus is another sub-region in a situation comparable to that of Central Asia. The difference is that the OSCE has for some time had an important role to play with regard to conflict prevention and post-conflict rehabilitation. Some of the conflicts in this area, such as Nagorno-Karabakh and Abkhasia, appear to be ‘frozen’. But progress is being made, for example in South Ossetia. We hope to add further to the long-term stabilisation of the sub-region by opening OSCE centres in Baku and Yerevan in 1999.

Our main event this year is of course the Istanbul summit. We are in the middle of challenging negotiations on a new Charter for European Security, to be agreed on at the summit. Success is not guaranteed, and the parties must do their utmost to conclude these negotiations in time for the summit. In Istanbul, we will also appoint a new High Commissioner for National Minorities and appoint the Chairman-in-Office for the year 2001. Last but not least, the