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Speech by Walter SCHWIMMER
Council of Europe Secretary General

on the occasion of the 4th part of the 1999 Session of the Council
of Europe Parliamentary Assembly (Strasbourg, 20 September 1999)

Mr President, dear friends,

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Let me thank you once again for the trust you have placed in me by electing me Secretary General of the Council of Europe. I consider it a great honour to have received the political mandate to guide our Organisation into the next century and millennium. In doing so, I will make every effort to fulfil my duties under the Statute and serve both organs, the Parliamentary Assembly and the Committee of Ministers.

Three weeks ago I took over from my predecessor, Daniel TARSCHYS, who I would like to thank once more for his endeavours. Sadly, one of my first tasks in office was to express condolences to the people of Turkey and Greece on the tragic loss of life as a result of the devastating earthquake that hit these countries. It was, however, gratifying to be able to offer not just token solidarity, but also practical help through the Council of Europe's Social Development Fund.

We are all horrified by the terrible consequences of the recent terrorist attacks in Russia. Whilst repeating here my condolences and feelings of solidarity with the Russian people, which I already expressed to Foreign Minister Ivanov, I would like to stress that, in response to such criminal acts, states have the right and duty to defend the lives of their citizens and the integrity of their territory, while respecting the rule of law and international legal and humanitarian standards. They should also be able to count on the full co-operation and support of the international community.

In recent weeks we have also witnessed horrifying scenes of violence and destruction carried out by paramilitary troops against the population of East Timor. These massive and gross violations of human rights, which deny the very values the Council of Europe was set up to ~~prevent~~ ^{uphold}, cannot leave us indifferent. I therefore very much welcome the Resolution adopted by the Committee of Ministers last Wednesday condemning the violence and calling on Indonesia to respect its international obligations, which I transmitted to the United Nations Secretary General, Mr Kofi ANNAN.

Mr President, please allow me also to use this opportunity to express my most sincere condolences to the Greek delegation on the tragic death of Greek Deputy Foreign Minister, Mr Yannis KRANIDIOTIS, while on his way to attend an important meeting on Balkan co-operation, organised by the Romanian government.

Mr President, I would further like to share with you some ideas on how I intend to fulfil the political mandate you have given me. In recent years the Assembly has repeatedly stated that it wished the Secretary General to play an active role on the European political scene, to be present at important political events and to react rapidly to major developments.

Let me assure you that I intend to comply fully with this request.

I consider it a major challenge to ensure the full political comeback of the Organisation as such, following the direction shown by the Assembly. Our future, Mr President, is made of ideas.

Mr President, this week the Assembly will debate the situation in South-East Europe and Kosovo. I am glad to report that, as requested by the Assembly, a Council of Europe Office has been set up in Pristina. I shall endeavour to give the Office, headed by my special representative, Mr Ulrich BOHNER, every support, including through a visit I plan to make to Kosovo shortly. In doing so, however, I would also like to appeal to all members of this Assembly to draw attention in their national parliaments to the important contribution of the Council of Europe to the work of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo.

As regards the region as a whole, the important role of our Organisation as regards the implementation of the Stability Pact was underlined at the Sarajevo Summit on 30 July 1999.

The Council of Europe's contribution to the Stability Pact, and to the work of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo, will be among my top priorities. I also intend to lend my full support to measures aimed at building civil society and at strengthening democratic forces in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. I already had the occasion to discuss these issues with the members of both the Icelandic and Romanian governments during my official visits to these countries in the past weeks. It is clear, however, that if our efforts are to be successful, we need to have adequate financial resources.

As I am preparing the Organisation's budget for next year, I must report to you that the gap between the tasks facing the Council of Europe and the resources its member governments are willing to make available has never seemed so wide, although a growing number of member states have indicated that they are indeed prepared to increase our budget. I am also grateful to those governments which have pledged voluntary contributions for specific projects.

The experience of the Kosovo crisis has once more demonstrated how disproportionately more expensive crisis resolution is as opposed to crisis prevention. The total annual budget of our Organisation is at about 200 million US dollars, which is considerably less than 1% of the immediate cost of the Kosovo crisis. Let me recall that the air campaign is estimated by NATO to have cost around 2.5 billion US dollars, and the cost of reconstruction in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia is estimated by the European Union at 18.5 billion US dollars.

Supporting preventive measures through the Council of Europe would save costs and casualties! Again, I would count on your support to drive this message home at national level.