

Oslobođenje: Interview with PDHR Tamir Waser

By: Vildana Selimbegovic

Oslobođenje: The Peace Implementation Council in Bosnia-Herzegovina was not unified this time?

Tamir Waser: Unfortunately, when the communiqué was done, the Russian Federation was unable to support that text.

Oslobođenje: Why?

Tamir Waser: The Russians should explain why they feel that way, but when it comes to the current situation after the floods in BiH, there was full solidarity in the PIC Steering Board; the ambassadors had already issued a statement on that earlier. In the course of our talks in the very session we were briefed on the current situation and the long-lasting recovery that BiH is facing after all this. Many PIC members, if not all, made it clear that they were already helping, either bilaterally or multilaterally, through other organizations. So that in that context there was indeed a full support to the citizens of BiH in the recovery from this horrible tragedy.

Oslobođenje: That recovery is inevitably going to be a very long-lasting process. Can you explain how the OHR would describe the situation in BiH at this moment?

Tamir Waser: As already said, it is indeed a tragic situation, which will require a very long-lasting recovery both in respect of economy and the very life of a great part of the population. Many people have remained without homes, jobs, livelihoods. And all that comes in a situation which was already difficult in the country, from the standpoint of economy and unemployment. So that regardless of the fact that this now is a true catastrophe, we must not forget that this country was already faced with an exceptionally difficult situation, even before that catastrophe.

Precisely for this reason, one of the key things that we discussed within the PIC was that these floods have stressed even more the importance and significance and need for talks in the coming four and a half months until election to focus on substantial issues like policies to improve economy, create jobs and fight corruption.

Oslobođenje: The communiqué repeated some strategic things that are related to BiH, but also sent a very clear message to the political leaders that it is time to get serious. However, you could see for yourselves that even this horrible tragedy is used - for example in Doboj - for political quarrels. Who will react? Will the OHR?

Tamir Waser: I believe that the citizens have already reacted quite clearly: I heard numerous people say that they were frustrated with reactions in this difficult situation. I often hear people say - I will not vote because that has nothing to do with me and my life; those are just political games, those are only people taking care of their own lives and not ours... But precisely what we saw in the last few days shows how important it is to have functioning institutions.

Oslobođenje: And how important it is to have more than zero marks on the account of Civil Defence.

Tamir Waser: Precisely. The institutions and the functioning of institutions is something that is decided in elections. I really hope that one of the positive things to come out of this huge tragedy will be the understanding among citizens that elections matter.

Oslobođenje: People also complain about what is on offer, maybe that is the problem?

Tamir Waser: I believe that that too is true. I have spoken to many people who said that they didn't know who to vote for. But they have several options; they can consider parties that they did not take into consideration earlier. Or maybe they can find the party list and find two or three names on it, rather low, and choose people they know and think that they will do things differently. Having in mind the election system in this country, they have the possibility to push those people higher up on the lists. And there is still the option to give it a thought about participating in the elections themselves as candidates.

Oslobođenje: There is an option that the International Community, which you here represent, that greatly contributed to re-location of the decision-making process from the Parliament to various sextuples, will get re-engaged and bring back powers to the Parliament and the governments?

Tamir Waser: I believe that the International Community has been cooperating with and acting through the governmental institutions, and will continue to do so in the future. After all, a solution of the Sejdić-Finci case and the Law on Defense Property as well as economic reforms that have to be enacted require a certain number of hands in several parliaments. However, one of the essential issues is that political parties must allow institutions to function. In particular, the Council of Ministers needs to be a body that forwards proposals to the Parliament, parliamentary committees should be used as a forum for discussions and changes in proposals. When the institutions are functioning in this way, things will be better for the whole country. When you look at the PIC *Communique*, you will see that the focus is on this very issue: it is the time for institutions to work, there should be no summer recess before the elections. In addition, the institutions have to be established shortly after the elections and they must address crucial reforms immediately. The economic situation of this country had already been difficult even before the recent events of the last couple of days, and it is even worse now. Bosnia and Herzegovina simply cannot afford to have things developing in the way they have been developing so far.

Oslobođenje: Has PIC discussed ways for identifying a different approach to BiH, in view of the current situation?

Tamir Waser: The strategy and objectives for BiH remain the same. Of course, we are always thinking about possible changes in our tactics. One of the issues that were discussed at length at the PIC was the Compact for Growth that will be launched by the EU next week. You do not need to see any opinion polls to know that employment, economy, better economic situation are the pressing issues for citizens of this country, and the process that is being launched is targeting those issues.

Oslobođenje: I agree, but BiH does not have mechanisms for coordination with the EU. How can we become a part of that project?

Tamir Waser: As far as a coordinating mechanism for this process is concerned, the answer should be given by the European Union. However, any decentralized state, such as BiH, must have an efficient decision-making process. Time and time again we are seeing that this is BiH's weakest spot. People want decisions, they are not interested in discussions on powers, distribution of responsibilities – they want solutions. Time and time again it is the people of this country who are at loss because politicians talk about the process and not about the results they have to achieve.

Oslobođenje: People are at loss but politicians end each of their terms with a gain and better property situation. They do not pay any attention the people and, to be honest, they pay less and less attention to the OHR. Have you noticed lack of reaction, to put it mildly, in relation to the High Representative's Report to the UN?

Tamir Waser: On the day the High Representative presented his Report, we all started to see the enormous scale of the flooding. However, it has been clear for some time that political leaders of this country always find a way to ignore things – whether it is our Report, conclusions of the Council of Ministers or PIC warnings – or they find a single positive thing in those reports and focus on it. That is way it is important to have free and active media in this country, so they can ask politicians these questions all the time.

Oslobođenje: Politicians give the media as much credit as to the report about them submitted to the United Nations. What is going to happen in Mostar, are there going to be any elections?

Tamir Waser: There must be elections in Mostar.

Oslobođenje: When?

Tamir Waser: The citizens of Mostar have been unable to vote for five years now. For nearly two years, they have not had a City Council, which makes it difficult to have a budget, which again stops the investments and employment. This is not a question concerning some political game, it is a question which concerns the real lives of people. And Mostar citizens must have an opportunity to vote in October and elect a City Council together with other officials in the general election.

Oslobođenje: How can that happen?

Tamir Waser: There is still time to adopt a solution to enable elections in Mostar, local and general election together in this year. The framework agreement, which was adopted by the six parties last year, is still on the table, but we have a problem with the SDA and HDZ. These two parties must be a part of any solution which is accepted, but they cannot be the only part of the solution. Leaders of these parties said publicly on many occasions that they are working on a solution for Mostar. But, whenever I went to visit Mostar I did not find any hard evidence that that was so.

The only thing we did see was an attempt of the HDZ to push a solution through the Council of Ministers and House of Peoples, for which there were no Bosniak votes. When this happens to the HDZ then they say this is a gross violation of the Constitution of BiH, a threat to their lives in BiH and to their existence. At the same time, they are prepared to use the same tactics towards others, which, to me, is not a willingness to compromise at all. But, we have often witnessed in this country agreements made in the last moments, and there is still time and I do wish to believe that these party leaders really care about the citizens of Mostar, that the people should really have a functional city, and not yet another unsolved question which will outlive the elections.

Oslobođenje: Is the solution, perhaps, for SDP to be the negotiator, because SDP is in coalition with SDA at the Federation level and with HDZ at the state level?

Tamir Waser: In this process, SDP played a very constructive role. This party is one of the six parties which helped adopt the framework document. I really have to commend Aner Žuljević from Mostar, from this party, who keeps talking about finding a solution and focusing on economy. If these two other parties also proposed people who would be as engaged in this process, who would approach it with the same dedication and with the same spirit for finding solutions, I think the situation would be quite different. But, it is a problem we face in various forms, various formations, so I don't want to say that I favour one party: at this time I am speaking about this concrete proposal.

Oslobođenje: Izetbegović and Čović discussed Mostar on behalf of SDA and HDZ BiH, and Aner Žuljević is the cantonal leader of SDP. As far as journalists know, cantonal leaders of HDZ and SDA do not even wish to talk?

Tamir Waser: Izetbegović and Čović said in their statements that the local leaders from their parties would continue the talks they had begun. When the OHR initiated this process on Mostar, all parties appointed people from either the city or cantonal level as negotiators in this process. And then it all stopped.

Oslobođenje: How will the flooded Bosnia meet the conditions for the EU?

Tamir Waser: Not-flooded Bosnia did not make much progress either on this issue. I do believe that all that is happening will show how important it is to have functional institutions, how important it is that there is cooperation between various parts of the country and how important it is to have in mind the fact that, regardless of the ethnic group you belong to, or the entity you come from, your needs are the same. And perhaps this realization will begin to change the situation as we go through the clean-up of the country, and will bring recovery of the country and perhaps it is this that will rearrange things and make them easier.

Impressive Engagement of the BiH Armed Forces

Tamir Waser: Yesterday the NATO Secretary General was here and, unfortunately, this country has not reached any progress when it comes to property since the time of his last visit. However, property is not the only thing that BiH must address in order to join NATO. The Armed Forces and Ministry of Defence must implement a reform so that they can really function within NATO. What we witnessed in the last few days was a truly impressive work of the Armed Forces helping the citizens of BiH. The Armed Forces have shown that they are capable of working in all parts of this country, with all citizens, and in the interest of all citizens. They really were, in what they did, true heroes. I think that they have improved their work and functionality, in particular when we have in mind the snowfall two years ago, when they were criticized for reacting slowly. I think that that is a part of a joint effort on reform by Minister Ibrahimovic, Minister Osmic, leadership of the Armed Forces, and that that has had a positive effect. I believe that that helps these institutions be better prepared to meet NATO standards, even in a situation when the property issue remains unresolved.