

Transcript of the Press Conference held in Mostar

Mr. Carl Bildt: Thank you. As you know the occasion for this meeting is the opening of the Regional Office of the High Representative which will be situated here in Mostar and it will cover the southern part of BiH and the Serb Republic. We are, of course, particularly pleased that this office will be headed by Sir Martin Garrod, who will widen his responsibilities, in the geographic sense, to this entire region. And this will create the possibilities of increasing the co-ordination of the combined peace implementation activities in this part of BiH. If we look at the overall state of affairs of the peace implementation, I normally say that is moving slowly forward and I stress "slowly", and I stress "forward", and I think the same applies to Mostar and to this region. We all know the challenges and the problems that are here and all over the country, but if we compare the situation to the situation a year ago, it is a noticeable, to some extent, dramatic improvement that has taken place.

This year we will see the continuation of the efforts, the common institutions of BiH will gradually start to operate. That makes it even more important for all of the institutions and bodies of the Federation to work effectively. We will try to get necessary actions in terms of economic reform to make a self-sustaining economic and social development of all of the country possible a couple of years from now. We will intensify efforts to co-ordinate refugees return, displaced persons, and economic reconstruction and, of course, we are heading for some major political development across the country in terms of municipal elections that will be of crucial importance to the overall political structure. All of this applies to all of Bosnia and Herzegovina and to this region. I think there has been also a noticeable progress in Mostar. I think a lot of excellent work has been done by the Mayor and Deputy Mayor together. This has been the most divided city in the Federation and the steps that have been taken should be seen against their background. And their efforts and their work will continue to have the full support of the Office of the High Representative. There are problems in different areas that we are all aware of in the region, let us just mention Stolac and Capljina - and that will also be the subject of the attention of the Office. With that, I think I hand over to Sir Martin Garrod for his remarks before we can see if we can answer the questions.

Sir Martin Garrod: Thank you very much. In view of what Mr. Carl Bildt has already said, I will keep my remarks very short. First of all, can I say it has been great pleasure and a privilege for me to be able to work here over the last two and a half years. I particularly enjoyed getting to know and working with so many people of BiH. I look forward very much to widening the area and getting to know the people of cantons 8 and 10 and the Republika Srpska - and I and my team together, of course working closely with Mr. Carl Bildt's Office in Sarajevo, will do all we can to assist in the field. I would like to just add one word to what Mr. Bildt said about Mostar. As you all know we have had many difficulties over the last two and half years, but I believe that collectively, together we have made progress. I think if one looks back, Mostar is very different from what it was two and a half years ago. There are of course other problems still to be overcome in the future, and although Mostar will, of course, be the object of our attention, the whole area will be much wider and I look forward very much indeed to working with all the people of southern Bosnia over the weeks and months ahead. Thank you very much!

Mr. Maclay: We are open to questions and please mention the organisation you represent in framing your questions !

Mr. Pejo Gasparevic (correspondent from HINA in Mostar): I would like to ask Mr. Bildt to answer the following question: After Mostar and Sarajevo, the attention of the world public and their diplomatic efforts is transferred to Brcko. How do you, as the first man of International Community in BiH see the disentanglement of the crisis in Brcko, and do you believe in the peaceful outcome of the crisis in Brcko, or will there be a war, as it is announced by the officials of Republika Srpska?

Mr. Carl Bildt: Well, in theory it is all rather simple. There was an agreement concluded in Dayton and signed in Paris, and that Agreement says very clearly that there will be a legal arbitration and everyone is bound and committed to fully implement the decision of the arbitration tribunal. That applies to Republika Srpska and to the Federation. I have noticed that there have been statements coming out of both Republika Srpska and the Federation during the past month that have clearly not been in the spirit of the respected peace agreement in this respect. President Plavsic has said things that are very difficult to reconcile with both the spirit and the letter of the peace agreement in this respect - and so has Mr. Ganic. They are all committed to respecting the verdict of the arbitration tribunal, that is the deal - and the peace agreement is there to be respected in full. And I think also

that, in spite of this rhetoric, everyone knows that peace is something far better than war. That is a bitter lesson that has been learned by each and every one in this country. I think that we all have a solution that it might take some time to implement all aspects of that solution, but I think that we will have the solution by mid February.

RTV Mostar & TV-IN:Mr. Bildt, despite everything that has been accomplished in Mostar, this city is still a place where human rights are being violated in a drastic manner. The International Community has long ago defined where the guilt lies. My question is: how is it possible that the International Community tolerates such policy and politicians who persistently keep ignoring all the requests which you place on behalf of the International Community, such policies and politicians due to which the EU project in the city failed. In regard to that, have you been informed about illegitimate construction works going on in the heart of Mostar, in the District, without any knowledge of the Mayor or the Deputy Mayor, and how do you comment on that?

Mr. Carl Bildt:First, I think, as we said initially, that there has been very substantial progress in Mostar over the past years. At the same time, you are entirely correct in pointing out the very severe remaining problems that are there, including respect of human rights. And I think you will see this office, within the powers that we have, taking a very firm line against these persons we consider responsible for those actions. At the same time, as we do whatever we can to encourage those that are working for the fulfilment of all aspects of the peace agreement. I have certainly been informed of what you are mentioning in terms of what is happening in the central zone, where there are actions done that are in contradiction with the status of the central zone in terms of building permits, or whatever. Some people were digging a great hole last year that remained a big hole, added to the other big holes in Mostar, and there might be another attempt to build a hole somewhere else. This is not the way it should be, it is not in the interest of anyone. I am also concerned with the situation on the Court Building, which is not a hole, but a building, and Sir Martin and I have been discussing how we will take that particular situation forward, because that is something that can impair the proper functioning of the city authorities of Mostar, and that is clearly neither acceptable nor tolerable, long term.

RTV Mostar & TV IN:Excuse me, but exactly at this moment there are works being conducted on that big hole and there is a lot of construction machinery in action.

Mr. Bildt:Yes, that seems to be the case. Let us see what happens. We will deal with that situation, but as I said, I am more concerned actually with the situation in the Court Building where there is a building that is supposed to be used by the city authorities. This hole-building activity could be a provocation in one direction or other, but let us see what comes out of it. But, clearly the Statute must be respected in terms of the central zone. This Office will continue to take an active role, although it has the regional responsibilities for trying to make certain that that happens.

Mr. Efica, "Radio Mostar":Mr. Bildt, expulsions in this city continue. The last one took place last night. The unified Police forces have not been established at the level of the city. What will you do so that they can function, so that it is not a dead letter on the paper?

Mr. Bildt:We are working very actively on that, I saw here Bob Wasserman, Deputy IPTF Commissioner and Jock Covey, my Deputy up in Sarajevo who are working very intensively on the police issues. They will be solved, although the time element should not be forgotten. You know that we have taken a very strong line on the evictions and indeed there was a very dramatic reduction of those. Sir Martin just got a report on this case yesterday. We will have to look into that. But whatever the background, be that political or economic, criminal or hooliganist or whatever, because it is essentially hooliganism, this can not be accepted in any sort of decent society and it should be in interest of each and every one to have this practice stopped.

Sir Martin:Yes, I think you are all well aware of my views on this whole business of expulsions. If I have spoken on this subject once, I have spoken on it a hundred times, and I have said, it will never stop until the political leaders say: This is enough, this has got to stop! We are aware that a lot of it is just a straight criminal activity, done for money, with three thousand, four thousand DM being handed over in a bar, who then arrange for a person, a family to be expelled, and then a false housing permit is being produced. It will not stop until people are behind prison bars. Not only those who are carrying out the expulsions, but those who are signing bogus housing permits. I am very encouraged that at last we have got one Croat political leader standing up and saying it has got to stop, and that is the Mayor, Mr. Prskalo. I very much hope that his lead will be followed by all the other Croat political leaders. Only then will it stop.

Voice of America:Mr. Bildt, many officials are of the view that the military part of the Dayton Agreement is nearly

done, and they have announced that 1997 will be mostly dedicated to the implementation of the Civil part of the Dayton Agreement, and as a first that it will be the return of refugees to their homes. Can we expect that in this year to have some major return of refugees, and I am not referring only to refugees accommodated abroad, but also refugees who are in Stolac or the ones who should be returned to Stolac or Mostar.

Mr. Bildt:The main challenge, as concerns political implementation, civilian implementation of the peace agreement, is to build the political institutions of the country, that is the common institutions of Bosnia and Herzegovina and ensure the proper functioning of the Federation. Because, with these in place and functioning, we can work towards the realisation of all the other aims of the peace agreement; without them nothing is going to work. So, that is the overall heading, I will say, then, beyond that, you have a number of items that need to be dealt with. In 1996 there was the return of roughly a quarter of a million displaced persons, at the same time we had new waves of people moving, primarily out of Sarajevo. I am quite convinced that figures from 1997 are going to be substantially higher in terms of the return of refugees and displaced persons. Exactly how high, no one knows. But, my experience and, I guess, your experience of the last year was that many refugees from different countries abroad came back for visits. I remember here in Mostar passing through and meeting in the shops, people from Sweden, still living in Sweden but coming here to see what the conditions were for returning and planning to return this year. The same is with Germany, Austria, Norway – and as I said, we will do whatever we can. That is going to be one of our absolute priorities. To help them facilitate this process. That being said, I do not think the entire task of refugee return is going to be completed by the end of 1997. We know from every war in history that it takes some time for the tension to subside and for the possibility to be there for people to move back. By historical standards, what has been achieved here during last year has been among the better, after wars, but we will improve radically on that during this year.

Youth Radio X and TV BiH:I would like to ask Mr. Bildt to comment on the statements by President Zubak in which he stated that Herceg-Bosna has not disappeared yet, and to give his comment on the way in which the situation in Serbia can reflect on the situation in BiH, since the area of the Republika Srpska has supported the coalition, and at the same time they are in favour of moving the Serbs of Republika Srpska in eastern Slavonia and Brcko?

Mr. Bildt:First on Herceg-Bosna authorities. It is extremely important that we ensure the full implementation of the Constitution of Bosnia and Herzegovina and of the Constitution of the Federation. That is not yet the case. We still have Herceg-Bosna institutions remaining, we still have old Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina institutions remaining. All of these are impairing the proper functioning of the Federation and of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and they must be phased out as soon as possible. Some of them are fulfilling functions, that must, of course, be transferred or taken over by Federation of BiH Institutions. It could take some minor time, but there must be a clear movement all the time in this direction. You mentioned the situation in Eastern Slavonia and Serbs in Brcko. This problem is, of course, a much wider one. There is a very large number of Serb refugees and displaced persons in Republika Srpska coming from the Croatian Krajinas, coming from western Slavonia and this adds to the social and political tensions and problems in the Republika Srpska. These people have the right to go back, and the denial of their right, of course, makes the situation in BiH more difficult. In the same way it is very, very important that conditions are created for those Serbs who are now in eastern Slavonia to stay there or to move back to their homes, wherever that might be. We have been discussing in the Contact Group and the Steering Board how this can be made abundantly clear to the authorities in Zagreb. If this fails, there will be a new wave of refugees of peace coming out of eastern Slavonia, and that will have a negative social and political impact irrespective of whether they end up in Belgrade, Brcko and Banja Luka.

Croat Radio Herceg Bosna:The first question is whether Mr. Bildt can answer what happened with the famous Decree on housing units which was adopted by the Presidency of BiH – which later on turned out to be a law. The second question refers to the situation in Travnik. Can you answer in more detail what is going on in Travnik in the view of the threats that the Governor received?

Mr. Bildt:We have noted information coming out of Travnik with concern, and we will see what we can do in order to defuse the tensions there. There has also been good development in that area if look over the record of the past year. As concerns the issue of the property law on the apartments, that remains one of the issues that concerns us the most. Because, as the legal situation is developing in both the Federation and Republika Srpska, it tends to de facto block the refugee return, and this is in contradiction with peace agreement and the Constitution. We are having intense discussions with the authorities on the issue of the property laws and changes that will be necessary. They are going on, I think literally as we speak, in the Federation Parliament and also in Republika

Srpska. As we go into 1997 now I think we will find that it will be very, very difficult for the International Community to give a massive amount of money for the reconstruction of houses if we do not have decent laws concerning property and who has the right to live in the houses.

Question(unintelligible name of the journalist): The Presidency of the Stolac Municipality, who are accommodated here in Mostar in exile, more accurately in the east part of Mostar, as we journalists are informed, have addressed you twice with an open letter in order to point out the problems we are facing down there with the repair of hundred houses for the return of Bosniaks. In the last months there have been five repaired houses destroyed into which Bosniaks should have returned during this year. How do you comment on that?

Mr. Bildt:That has been another of the things we dealt with quite a lot – the blowing up of houses. We had a wave of that during late part of October, beginning of November. We took different actions, and if we look over the country we would see we have had a dramatic reduction of that. But, then we have seen the situations, of which Stolac, is one example, where there has been a continuation and there are other tensions as well. We have been discussing actions on the highest political level and we have made clear, myself, the Commander of SFOR and IPTF, to the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, to the Federation and the Republika Srpska that we are prepared to take stronger action if we see this practice continued. And again, do not ask the international tax payers to pay for the rebuilding of the houses when there are people running around blowing them up. That is a message that should be understood by the political leaders and when they understand it they should take action accordingly, according to their own interest. There are already too many houses blown up and too few houses rebuilt.

Question:Does the International Community plan to install the economic sanctions against the side which does not respect the agreement on Mostar, since until now, the guilty ones were mostly rewarded?

Mr. Bildt:What I said previously, applies. If the representatives of the tax payers, because in factories the tax payers are those who work, see houses being blown up, then they would say why should we pay for the building of the houses when people run around blowing them up. That is common sense, and it is important that political leaders everywhere understand that this will happen. You can call it whatever you want, but this is the way it is going to work and, accordingly, it is in the very strong interest of every community of BiH to stop this practice, because every community needs help with the reconstruction of the housing all over the country.

Chairman: Thank you all very much!