

# **Transcript of the Press Conference in Mostar**

## **Avis Benes - OHR:**

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. It is my pleasure to greet you at the press conference of the international organisations seated in Mostar. It is also my pleasure to greet our colleague Henning Phillip from the Press Office of OSCE Mission in Sarajevo.

On behalf of OHR we shall have a couple of items for you.

Let me first remind you of something that is taking place at the state level. Namely, you received a press release yesterday on the meeting of the High Representative and the Peace Implementation Council Steering Board about the Constitutional amendments. As stated in the press release, the High Representative is going to meet with the political parties from Republika Srpska today. That is a part of his efforts to provide full, full implementation of the agreement, which is known as Mrakovica-Sarajevo Agreement, signed on 27 March. As you probably know, the Peace Implementation Council is also insisting on the full implementation of this agreement.

The second issue I would like to mention refers to the situation in this Canton. We would like to emphasize here that last Friday, 5 April, Principal Deputy High Representative, Ambassador Hays, who was in Mostar for the press conference about the Hercegovacka Banka, and Deputy High Representative Bercot met with Cantonal officials, Messrs. Vrankic, Dziho, Macic and Coric regarding the extremely worrying situation in Canton 7. The Principal Deputy High Representative Ambassador Hays reiterated the OHR's position that the cantonal officials bear full responsibility towards citizens both as politicians and as their representatives to find a solution for the Canton, which is, as you know, paralyzed in a number of areas. It was also stated that OHR is willing to assist in order to solve the institutional part of the problem, but the decision on salaries, better collection of taxes, inefficiency of expensive administration and a number of other issues can be made only by the elected officials in order to make these issues work. Ambassador Hays stated that he expects a more serious and responsible approach than it has been demonstrated so far. This is the time of ownership, mature and responsible governance and it is time to act in a manner consistent with that. So far, OHR has no information that any concrete and final progress has been achieved by the cantonal officials although there are some indications that during the day some developments might occur, but it is also up to you to check to what extent this really happened. We are indeed very concerned with this situation, especially since all these negotiations are being conducted while budget beneficiaries on both sides suffer negative consequences. The people are the hostages of different political agendas, and their salaries are being used as a political tool. Certainly, in democracy political instruments like calculations, resignations and various negotiations are a legitimate part of the political consensus, however, OHR considers that it is unacceptable to use the hard earned money of budget beneficiaries as a tool for bargaining without the consent of the people concerned. Elected officials for sure never received a legitimate mandate for such games. OHR will remain engaged in helping to find a long-term workable and legal solution and will help the Canton find solutions to some problems which exist. However, this can be done only if Cantonal officials acknowledge their own responsibility and do not expect that a problem will be solved only by pointing out in the OHR or the International Community direction. This is a statement referring to a serious situation in the Canton. The OHR is still involved, it carries out negotiations but what is needed is additional effort by the Cantonal officials.

Third issue that I am going to mention refers to the Conference which was held in Trebinje last weekend. It was a Conference on Peace and Inter-religious Dialogue. This unique event, organized by His Eminence the Episcopo for Zahum, Hercegovina and Primorje - Mr. Grigorije - gathered representatives from the Orthodox, Catholic, Moslem, and Jewish communities as well as famous theologians - from both BiH and neighboring countries - who came together for two days to talk about the need for peace, reconciliation, tolerance, and dialogue between the different religions. The Conference was also attended by several representatives from the International Community - among them, Ambassador Istvan Oszi, Special Envoy of the HR in Trebinje and Dr. Anwar Azimov, Senior Adviser for the High Representative on Inter-religious and Inter-ethnic issues. OHR South wants to take this opportunity to congratulate Episcopo Grigorije for his highly timely and important initiative, and praise all the participants for the contribution to the successful and fruitful results of the conference. The press statement, issued by the participants of the conference, is an important document aimed at strengthening the tolerance, mutual understanding and cooperation between different religious communities in the interests of peace and reconciliation process in BiH. We

would like once again to welcome the initiative of the Vladika and express our support for the discussions held in Trebinje over the weekend, and to stress again our firm belief that inter-religious dialogue, mutual understanding and cooperation are essential elements in the consecution of a stable and durable peace for BiH. We believe that the spirit of Trebinje Conference could be spread to different regions of the country and the useful experience of the conference would be repeated in other places of BiH. Mutual cooperation between different religious communities in the reconstruction of both religious and historical monuments is extremely important and in that sense I have to express the pleasure of the High Representative, who paid a visit to different places that have religious, historical and cultural significance in Herzegovina two days ago. Although the situation was positive unfortunately representatives of the Catholic Church did not attend this visit but it is to be hoped that it won't be this way in the future.

Lastly, we have been asked by the Organisation for Southeast Europe Enterprise Development (SEED), which is a part of the joint World Bank Group – International Finance Corporation Global SME Department to remind you of their forthcoming event. There is a media advisory down there. I think it is a significant event. Namely in co-operation with its partners and sponsors, this organization holds free business planning seminarsdevelopment of entrepreneurship. Seminars that will be taking place throughout BiH in the following couple of weeks are a part of the First Annual Student Business Plan Competition in BiH. These seminars are primarily aimed at economics students, but also at students of any faculties who are potential entrepreneurs and who are thinking about opening their own business in the future. This seminar will take place in Mostar on Saturday, 13 April 2002, at the Amphitheater of the University of Mostar between 09.00 and 17.00 hrs. More information and contact information are available in the media advisory down there.

That is all on behalf of the OHR for the time being.

#### **Henning Philipp - OSCE:**

Good morning everybody. No point from the OSCE. Just to say that I am happy to be back to Mostar. I will be available for you in the OSCE Regional Center for the next two to three weeks until the arrival of Luka's replacement.

Thank you.

#### **Maj. Lebrun - MND SE:**

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen. Today I have no particular statement but some word about Harvest. I want to thank all media that had some articles to announce the beginning of Harvest campaign. And I want to add that all illegal weapon bring back increase the safety of this country. We encourage all media to always give such support.

Thank you.

## **Questions**

**Q: Zoran Kresic (Vecernji List/Croat Radio Herceg Bosna):** I would like to ask you Ms. Benes to tell us whether there will be some resignations i.e. will the OHR do something in order for those responsible for delay in the payment of salaries and blockage of the budget to be removed by the OHR? Is this something that we can expect?

**A: Avis Benes:** Of course, as experienced journalist you probably know what my response will be. My answer is that decisions on removals or any other measures of the High Representative are never announced in advance as it would kill the purpose. In any case, on the basis of our statement I think that you can see to what extent we are concerned about the situation and to what extent we think that Cantonal officials must assume more responsibility for the current situation. At this moment I cannot say more about the direction that your question is going.

**Q: Zoran Kresic (Vecernji List/Croat Radio Herceg Bosna):** Does it mean that the possibility for their

removals is excluded?

**A: Avis Benes:** I do not remember that we have ever said that certain options are excluded for a certain case. In the line with that, it probably applies to this one as well. But do not consider this as a threat with removals.

**Q: Pejo Gasparevic (HINA/BBC):** I have a question for Mr. Phillip. Implementation of the Sarajevo Agreement on Constitutional changes is encountering great problems in the Republika Srpska. This Agreement is important for adoption of a permanent election law. If the implementation of the Agreement eventually fails, what will happen with elections in October?

**A: Henning Philipp:** If the Agreement fails, what I really do not expect, regarding elections we are not falling into a legal vacuum. Elections will then be conducted on the basis of 1998 rules and regulations.

**Q: Faruk Kajtaz (Youth Radio X):** You said you have contacts with the Cantonal officials regarding the problems in this Canton. Do you have any contacts with the Federation Government taking into consideration that in the line with the Constitution the Federation Government has the responsibility for the overall work of Cantonal governments and a series of other issues, such as payment system, taxation policy, etc. Do you have any contacts with the Federation Government?

**A: Avis Benes:** My answer to this question will be very short – we do.

**Q: Zoran Kresic (Vecernji List/Croat Radio Herceg Bosna):** Is it correct that Ambassador Hays suggested immediate de-blockage of the account and immediate payment of salaries to budget beneficiaries in the meeting that was held on Friday?

**A: Avis Benes:** Ambassador Hays suggested several variants for the way out of the crisis. But what is important and what the emphasis was on is that it is expected from the Cantonal officials to determine their proposals for solution in the days following the Friday's meeting.

**Q: Pejo Gasparevic (HINA/BBC):** If possible, I would like to pose one more question, this time for the OHR. Herzegovina-Neretva Canton is one of the ten Cantons in the Federation. True, it is the largest and has a great importance for processes not only in the Federation but in BiH as well. However, does it seem to you that the International Community is becoming a sort of a hostage of the problems in this Canton and that problems in other Cantons, which have financial difficulties too, are being neglected? Also, in the same context, how would you interpret and what are your expectations from the visit of Mr. Tonino Picula, Croatian Minister of Foreign Affairs? Thank you very much.

**A: Avis Benes:** You are right, there are financial problems in other Cantons too throughout the Federation. I cannot speak in-depth about Cantons which are not located in our area of responsibility. As far as the area of responsibility of OHR South is concerned, I have to say that Canton 7, which has a special regime, is the one with the greatest problems, where financial and political problems interlace. Referring to the part of your statement that the International Community is becoming a hostage, as emphasized in the statement, there is a tendency to consider OHR to be organization that should resolve all problems by imposing its decisions, decrees, etc. I think that it is quite clear that the OHR is more than interested in the resolution of this situation, the OHR is going to help legally and with advises, through co-operation and mediation. However, to expect that the OHR will resolve the situation while the elected officials would be sitting and would give up any responsibility – it is not the direction towards which the OHR will go.

As for the meeting with Minister of Foreign Affairs of Republic of Croatia, Mr. Picula, it is correct that the IC representatives are going to meet the Croatian delegation on Friday. At this moment I cannot give you more details about this meeting.

**Q: Alija Bijavica (Radio Stari Most):** I rarely react and I am afraid I am not going to say something which will be pleasant for you.

**A: Avis Benes:** It is up to you to ask.

**Q: Alija Bijavica (Radio Stari Most):** I think the following: with this kind of situation in Canton 7, we cannot speak about the situation in Central Bosnia. We can only assume what is happening there. Such a political situation is surely a speciality of our region. I am sure that something like this does not exist anywhere in Europe. It

is obvious that elected officials are not performing their duties. Why do not you start thinking about clerical government that would at least provide functioning of the Canton. The citizens suffer negative consequences, we have strikes of almost all budget beneficiaries – police, teachers, profesors, etc.

**A:      Avis Benes:** I believe that the system and organization of the authority in this country has been defined by the law. Of course, if all sides would reach a consensus on this issue it would be possible to change the way it currently operates. I think that citizens also have the power, which is mainly manifested at elections, to sanction those for who they think as of officials who have not adequately represented their interests and are not capable of doing that. The response to this question could be viewed in this context.