

Transcript of the Press Conference in Mostar

Avis Benes - OHR Spokesperson

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the press conference of the international organizations seated in Mostar. It seems that our new arrangement has discouraged some of our cameramen. I hope it won't be a practice.

Today I am especially pleased that we have with us Deputy High Representative and Head of OHR South, Mr. Jean-Pierre Bercot. Due to previously taken obligations Mr. Bercot will not be in a position to attend the whole press conference. He is here to present you his statement today, copies of which you can have after the press conference.

Mr. Bercot?

Jean-Pierre-Bercot - Head of OHR South

Good morning to you all.

One of the priorities of the OHR office in Mostar is to give every possible support to the finalization of a very important process for all citizens of this Canton. This is the process of establishment of joint seats of the Herzegovina-Neretva Canton and the adoption of a truly unified budget. These are long outstanding issues - in the view of the International Community, too long. Since I arrived as Head of this Office, my staff and I have held a number of meetings and have corresponded with Cantonal officials, with the aim of increasing the transparency and efficiency of this process. In addition, we have tried to emphasize the absolute need for a joint approach by Cantonal officials.

Last week, I asked for a variety of information from the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister, which included a request for a clear presentation of the ministries, the number of employees, and the pay rolls. I have received some information from both. Unfortunately, the information which I requested to be submitted under joint signature arrived separately. In other words, the Deputy Prime Minister provided information from the Bosniak element of the Government, and the Prime Minister from the Croat element. Especially problematic is the issue of the different basis for calculation of salaries. It had been agreed that this practice would cease. I want to strongly underline that the OHR does not support such a principle of disparity of basis for calculations for the same positions. Nevertheless, the fact that this partial information was finally provided can be considered as a first step in the right direction, at least in the sense of transparency. However, there remains a complete lack of progress in the sense of unification and joint approach of Cantonal officials. On this matter, I would like to point out that the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister have still not presented a jointly co-signed Action plan for the unification of the Government Ministries, as they accepted during recent meetings with me. Their failure illustrates that they are not even able to agree on what they agree and disagree.

I consider this attitude to be obstructionist. If leading officials of the Canton are not able to produce a simple joint working document, they do not live up to their commitments and promises that I have personally witnessed. It is therefore of no surprise that various social groups in the Canton are dissatisfied with the performance of their elected officials, as is reflected in recent strikes in the Canton, and the potential of even more strikes.

With such irresponsible behavior by the Cantonal officials, the process of merging is paralyzed, and with the practice of applying differing standards, it is very difficult to expect that the Canton will be able to adopt a truly unified budget. In order to demonstrate how very important the timely adoption of the budget is, I will point out that in the Cantonal Constitution there exists a provision that says that the Governors may dissolve the Cantonal Assembly if the budget is not adopted within ninety days from the beginning of the fiscal year.

OHR and I personally consider the situation most serious. I will not remain a mere observer to this situation and give tacit support to the current status quo and scandalous behavior of Cantonal officials. In a modern democratic society, politicians have to be held accountable to the public for their unacceptable acts and failure to live up to promises.

I do not have anything else to add today. All possible questions will be answered this morning by the OHR South Spokesperson, Ms. Avis Benes. Thank you for your attention ladies and gentlemen.

Avis Benes - OHR Spokesperson

Thank you Mr. Bercot, who has left. Before we proceed with the statements, I would like to kindly ask you all to try to come here on time because we also try to start press conference on time, at 11.00 hrs in order to respect of schedules of all of you. Also, I would like to ask all those who are not journalists or technicians to please sit in the back of the room, of course not now but in principle.

One more statement on behalf of the OHR today. It refers to the High Representative and his visit to Brussels. As you all know he has been in Brussels over the last three days. Yesterday, he addressed Ministers of the European Union and other bodies. During the visit to Brussels, the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, had a good and constructive meeting with the Croatian Foreign Minister Tonino Picula. Both agreed that the BiH Constitutional Court's "Constituent Peoples Decision", which will ensure for the peoples and citizens of BiH full representation and protection of their rights in both Entities, must be implemented with no further delays. During the talks, the High Representative emphasized that the solution must be found in Bosnia and Herzegovina, by Bosnia and Herzegovina's political representatives and leaders. He also stressed that it is the responsibility of BiH's political parties and leaders to find a solution that will satisfy all sides. Foreign Minister of Republic of Croatia Tonino Picula and the High Representative agreed to keep exchanging their views on this important issue and meet again in Zagreb in early March.

This statement is also available in a written form. As there is no specific statement from OSCE, I would like to give the floor to Kirsten of the UN.

Kirsten Haupt- UNMIBH Public Affairs Officer

I also have no special statement but I would like to make some comments following the statement of the Deputy High Representative. As you remember a few weeks ago we have spoken about the same issue, namely the physical integration of the governmental institutions. And at that time we have said also that physical integration of the Ministry of Interior provides actually an excellent model for the remaining governmental institutions to follow suit regarding physical integration. The physical integration of the Ministry of Interior actually shows that it is really possible to overcome the obstacles into physical integration and to unite Bosniak and Croat police in the same building. The same we have also seen with the police administration here in Mostar – the single police administration of the city. And now few weeks or month already after these steps towards physical integration we can also see that it is actually big advantage towards effectiveness of the police force. So UNMIBH likes to express its support for the statement and for the demands put forward by the Deputy High Representative here today. And as he also mentioned himself in his statement these steps need to be done in order to work in the interest of all citizens of this Canton.

That's all I have for you today. Thank you.

Avis Benes - OHR Spokesperson

Thank you Kirsten. SFOR does not have any specific statement either, which leads us to the part of the press conference reserved for your questions.

Questions

Q: Tina Jelin (Studio 88): Referring to the part of Mr. Bercot's statement that the OHR will not give tacit support to the current situation – what is basically what Mr. Bercot and the OHR South can do about it?

A: Avis Benes: In any case, you have seen in our statements and since the new Head of our Office assumed his position that even stronger dynamics towards the unification of the seats of the Cantonal Ministries has been created. The OHR intends to be very pro-active on this issue. The Cantonal officials will further be reminded of their

obligations. And the intention is also to make this process even more transparent for the sake of the public so that the public themselves can judge how the things are going on. I really do not think that this is the moment when we should talk about the further possibilities of the OHR's actions.

Q: Mirsad Behram (RTV Mostar): A question for Avis. With regard to the statement of Mr. Bercot – I would like to ask if we could connect the following issues. Namely, two days ago “Radom za boljitak” party has asked from the President of the West Herzegovina Cantonal Assembly to consider a possibility of organizing early elections. Few days ago, SDP of Herzegovina Neretva Canton has asked for a dismissal of the Cantonal Government, even though it is not clear whether they asked for dismissal of a Bosniak part of the Government or the entire Government. Does this have something to do with the statement of Mr. Bercot? And anyway how would you comment on these requests?

A: Avis Benes: In order to avoid that statement of Mr. Bercot is wrongly interpreted, I will say that the OHR is, in no way, advocating early elections. What was wanted to be emphasized here is the fact how important and needed timely adoption of the budget is but with this way of behavior it is really questionable if it will be possible to do so soon. We think that this is very concerning and we think that the public should be aware of this. When it comes to the other requests, it is obviously not up to the OHR to comment on them, but they obviously derived from a great dissatisfaction with the work of both Governments. It is obvious that the time is coming when the politicians will have to be more responsible and will have to show more accountability for their actions.

Q: Silvija Vladic (HTV Mostar): I have a question for the UN. Taking into consideration that the European Union has never had any programme related to the police forces, how will the hand-over strengthen the rule of law, as emphasized in the press release? Is this another experiment in BIH? Has the UN failed to do its job by this transfer of the duties and tasks?

A: Kirsten Haupt: No, I do not think that this is an experiment and I do not think that the UN has failed. I think that the UN Mission has taken and will take, as you expect, the fulfillment of its mandate as far as it can by the end of this year. And of course we will not claim that all tasks have been fulfilled. There will still be remaining tasks to be followed up and situations to be monitored. That will be taken over by the European Union with a new Mission, starting from the next year. As you can see, the process starts quite early and decisions have been made already now, we are in February now and there are more than 10 months remaining until the end of this year. First of all, it gives the UN still a lot of time to continue with the implementation of its mandate until the end of this year. And it gives enough time to the EU to prepare itself to take over from the UN at the end of this year. I believe that the early start of this transition, if you want to call it that, shows actually how seriously this is being taken. So I would disagree with you to call this an experiment.

A: Avis Benes: If I may add since it regards the position of the OHR on this issue. The High Representative and the OHR most warmly welcome decision of the European Union on this issue. The increase of presence of the EU here demonstrates and reflects their even greater commitment to the inclusion in the processes in the region. Police Mission of the EU will in some way strengthen and increase the profile of the EU in BIH, and also make the feeling of European processes and integration as a real and concrete experience for the citizens of this country. In any case, this is one more step in the process of getting closer to Europe – the process which has been supported all the time by the OHR. As for the UN and IPTF, the OHR holds that they have really achieved a lot in the past.

Q: Pejo Gasparevic (HINA): It seems that the IC is currently making the most ambitious efforts on the arrest of Karadzic and Mladic. Few days ago, Carla del Ponte stated in Banja Luka that both of them are somewhere in BIH. Last night, Serbian Prime Minister Djindjic said that no war criminals will be permitted to freely walk around Serbia any longer. This basically means that the doors to Serbia are closed for both Karadzic and Mladic. Could you tell us what is SFOR knowledge about the situation of Karadzic and Mladic, their whereabouts?

A: Maj. Lebrun: There is only one thing I can say about your question, especially clear about Karadzic and Mladic. I am Spokesperson for this Division, I am not Spokesperson of SFOR. Obviously to know what is SFOR position on that you must call the SFOR PIO in Sarajevo. But as I know about this topic the most important for SFOR is to provide safety and security. It is responsibility of local authorities to catch these people.

Q: Faruk Kajtaz (Youth Radio X): I would like to return to the statement of Mr. Bercot. It is obvious that today's statement opens many questions. There is no political agreement at the Cantonal level. Elections are not a solution to the problem. The question is – what is a solution? Is it possible that the OHR will impose a solution, which is in the mandate of the OHR, in order at least to make the life of ordinary citizens easier, since politicians have proven to be completely irresponsible ?

A: Avis Benes: I could agree with the last part of your question. The solution is primarily to respect what has been in principle agreed upon. Verbally, theoretically and with certain small steps the problem of the establishment of joint seats in the Herzegovina Neretva Canton is not questionable, and all agree that this should be done. This is not even placed at the level of political problem. However, the practice and these small steps that are being made in that direction are very dissatisfactory. The priority is definitely to persist on the fact that what has been promised and agreed upon – should be respected. As for theoretical possibilities – what if or what if not – it is not an opportunity for me to talk about at this very moment.