

Transcript of the Press Conference in Mostar

Avis Benes - OHR

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the press conference of the international organisations seated in Mostar. Before we start let me remind you once again that today at 12.00 hrs, Dr. Christian Schwarz-Schilling, the International Mediator for BiH Federation and RS, will give a press statement in the Federation Government building. He will give a press statement after his meeting with Governor Džiho and Vice Governor Vrankić. However, you will have opportunity to ask questions regarding his three-day visit to Herzegovina, within which he visited Čapljina, Stolac, and it is upon him to tell you more about it. The final press conference that will cover his entire visit to BiH will take place in the Hotel Grand in Sarajevo on Saturday at 11.00 hrs.

Today, we shall have slightly different speaking order since we have the honour to have Mr. Harry Leefe, the Head of the UNHCR office, here with us for the first time.

Harry Leefe - UNHCR

Thank you very much. This is my first press conference in Mostar although I have been here for over one year now. I do have something important to say that is the reason that I am here. I'll now read the press statement.

UNHCR is pleased to announce that on the 4th of March 2002 an organised group of 15 Croat families returned to villages of Perutac and Inac in Mostar North municipality. This was a phase one return, meaning a return to unoccupied and destroyed houses. As usual with this type of returns, the returnees will be accommodated in a house used as a collective accommodation, clean their houses and prepare them for possible reconstruction assistance. Another group of Croats announced their plans to return to the village of Zakriz in the same municipality on the 11th of March.

UNHCR welcomes the sustained progress in the Property Law implementation currently taking place. In UNHCR southern region, as of the end of last year the implementation rate varied from 41 % in Canton 7 and 31% in southeastern RS, to almost 100% in Central Bosnia Canton (Canton 6).

UNHCR is also very pleased with the number of Serbs who returned to the southern region. According to UNHCR statistics, 1768 Serbs returned to Central Bosnia Canton (or 26%) and 2951 to Canton 7 (or 40%) of the total number of returnees to these cantons, which is significant increase compared with 1218 Serb who returned to Canton 6 and 380 to Canton 7 during the year of 2000. There are several factors that have led to success in the implementation of the Property Laws in 2002. Amendments imposed by the High Representative and an increasing awareness among people illegally occupying a property that this does not represent a long-term solution to their own housing problems have resulted in a rise in the implementation rate to more satisfactory levels. However, local authorities still fail to ensure that all unclaimed apartments are used as alternative accommodation. We would like to reiterate that the provision of alternative accommodation, where applicable, is an obligation that rests with local authorities and housing authorities, not with the international community.

Although the implementation rate is starting to speed up, there are still obstructions to the return process. Certain associations or individuals are conducting illegal actions, including the use of force to prevent evictions, and are making threats to personnel working for municipal offices and against international agencies. UNHCR wishes to remind all BiH citizens and associations that criminal codes in both Entities stipulate that obstructing an official in the execution of his/her official duty is a punishable offence. This type of behaviour will not be tolerated. The same applies to the looting of apartments and houses by temporary occupants.

Without the rule of law there will be no basis in this region for long-term political stability or economic growth. It is a high time for local authorities to complete the implementation of Property Laws and concentrate on economic issues, so crucial for the future of this country.

That is my statement. I'll take questions after the other agencies.

Avis Benes:

On behalf of the OHR, I have one point for you today.

It refers to the issue that we have already raised here at one of the press conferences concerning the problem of construction works on the location of the Mostar Electro-Mechanical School. You will be able to get a written statement afterwards and therefore there is no need for translation.

The Deputy High Representative and Head of OHR South, Mr. Jean-Pierre Bercot, is very concerned with the lack of progress in finding a solution on the issue of the Mostar Electro-Mechanical School. I wish to remind you that on 12 December 2001, after meeting with OHR South, Municipality West issued a municipal decision stopping the work on the site of the EM school. After over one month, on 21 January 2002 the investor stopped the work and Municipality West forwarded to OHR Sarajevo an application for a Land Use Waiver. The work has not continued since. The next step was to formalize the matter of compensation for the school. This is the responsibility of the Cantonal Ministry of Education; the Minister and her Deputy were reminded of their obligation by Deputy High Representative South in a letter. It is most unfortunate that six weeks later there is no sign of progress on this issue. Work on the site is still halted and we have not been advised of the compensation assessment which I repeat is the responsibility of the Ministry of Education. OHR South considers this lack of progress wholly unacceptable, thus we have had to raise this matter at the weekly press conference. But we do so because this issue is one of general interest to the citizens of Mostar who deserve better from their government. We do not accept that education facilities are usurped for private and commercial interests without the law being followed, i.e., due compensation agreed upon and given. OHR South thus expects that the Minister and Deputy Minister of Education resolve this issue immediately.

That is today's statement of the OHR. Now I would like to give the floor to OSCE and Mr. Ludvik Skoberne.

Ludvik Skoberne - OSCE

Good afternoon.

I only wish to inform you that the Head of the OSCE Mission to BiH, Ambassador Robert Beecroft, is visiting municipality of Drvar today. Yesterday and the day before yesterday he held meetings with the highest RS officials. The topics of discussions were the efforts how to reduce military expenditures in both entities. During today's discussions with the officials of Drvar, he will talk about return of refugees and displaced persons as well as about the implementation of property laws. After this visit there will be a press conference in Drvar.

Thank you.

Avis Benes -

Thank you Luka. Now, Kirsten of the UN.

Kirsten Haupt - UNMIBH

I have just a few comments to make regarding yesterday's Security Council meeting on Bosnia and Herzegovina. Yesterday, on the 5th of March, the United Nations Security Council and Secretary-General Kofi Annan welcomed the decision by the European Union to take over UN's police training and monitoring duties in Bosnia and Herzegovina next year and expressed optimism that the EU can help the country continue to build a professional, multi-ethnic police force.

The Council unanimously adopted a resolution welcoming the Bosnian Peace Implementation Council's (PIC) acceptance last week of the EU's offer to provide a EU Police Mission (EUPM), from 1 January 2003, to follow the end of the mandate of the UN Mission in Bosnia and Herzegovina (UNMIBH).

The Secretary-General noted that UNMIBH was on track to complete its core mandate by the end of this year. Specifically, UNMIBH has transformed and reduced the police force from a 40,000-strong wartime militia to a 16,000-member professional police force trained in human rights, Mr. Annan said. There still remained challenges, however, including low police salaries and poor housing conditions, lack of funds and continued political interference in the work of law enforcement agencies.

"Ultimately, it is the people of Bosnia and Herzegovina who must take control of their own destiny and build a peaceful, prosperous future as a successful multi-ethnic state," Mr. Annan said.

Avis Benes:

Let me mention that the speech of the HR delivered in New York is available in our office if you have not had a chance to get by now. As far as I know there is no special statement on behalf of SFOR today. Now we have come to the part of the press conference reserved for your questions.

Questions

Q: Tina Jelin (Studio 88): I have three questions for the OHR. Avis, is the OHR aware that the Mayor of Mostar, Mr. Tomic has resigned. Could you comment, please?

What is happening with the construction site on the location of the former City Pharmacy – the construction works seem to have continued? What is the OHR position on that?

Thirdly, Cantonal officials were supposed to organise a meeting about the distribution of funds from the single Health account. The financial situation in the field of health was also the reason for the strike of health workers on the Bosniak-majority part of our Canton. Have you got any details?

A: Avis Benes: As for your third question, at this moment I do not have any detail information. Anyhow, we can meet later on.

As far as the first question is concerned, the OHR considers it as absolutely unacceptable that the works on the location of the former Pharmacy are continued given that this is contrary to the instructions of the City Administration as well as OHR requests. In any case, the OHR expects the City Administration to be the one to undertake all necessary measures in order to ensure efficient application of the adopted protocol on suspension of construction works on the location of the Pharmacy.

As for the question regarding the announced resignation, I am afraid I cannot tell you much about it. We have just received an information about that and we do not want to comment on that too much, excepts for the fact is that the OHR wants functioning City Administration that will be resolving all problems that arise in a constructive and open manner.

Q: Mirsad Behram (RTV Mostar): I have a question for OHR. As far as I know, last week football club Velez has again asked to return to the Bijeli Brijeg stadium. As far as I remember, last year municipality Mostar South-West decided to give this stadium to the football club Zrinjski. At that time it was reported that the OHR would give the final word on this issue. Since a long period of time has already passed, has the OHR given any sort of the final word on this and when will Velez return to its stadium which it used for 50 years?

A: Avis Benes: I think it was recently when Velez played at that stadium. However, at this moment, I cannot tell you anything specific on that issue. It is correct that the OHR gave a certain statement after the session of the

municipality South-West, but I will have to check it out once again and get back to you.

Q: Pejo Gasparevic (HINA): I have a question for Ms. Kirsten. The latest report of the State Department inter alia reads that one of the problems in the Balkans is problem of trafficking in BiH, i.e. trafficking of women from Eastern European countries. Do you have some figures or more information about this? As you might know, at the end of the last year it was discovered in Zenica that one of these unfortunate women was infected by the HIV virus. Also, it was reported that she used to work in Medjugorje before. Could you tell us what the situation looks like in this region? Thank you.

A: Kirsten Haupt: In general on this issue now we are paying quite some attention to this very *[interruption]* subject, if I may say so. Last year, a special programme was started to fight women trafficking in BiH and to support local authorities in this fight. In the last six months, this team so call Stop team in the co-operation with the local police all over BiH has monitored 270 raids on *[interruption]*. Following those raids, over 800 women and girls involved in prostitution have been interviewed. Since March 1999, about 410 trafficking victims have been assisted and repatriated. You know that in this regard...regarding the repatriation we worked very closely with the IOM, the International Organization for Migrations. Of course, the consequence of these raids and the activities of these Stop teams together with local law enforcement agencies is also to launch the proceedings against traffickers and bordello owners. Over 50 criminal charges have resulted from the work of these Stop teams. Sentences have ranged from 4 to 36 months imprisonment and also fines up to 10,000 KM. This does not seem very much considering the extent of this problem but just to put this into perspective before these teams came into action there was not a single conviction in BiH related to these offences. So the entire field of work of the Stop teams will continue to remain a priority of the UN Mission until the end of its mandate. And also of course activities to enable the local law enforcement agencies to continue this work. Regarding this very specific case, which you mentioned, I cannot give any details on this now. I have to get back to you.