

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

## **Avis Benes - OHR:**

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the press conference of the international organisations seated in Mostar.

Today, on behalf of the OHR I will mention one quite global issue and one quite local issue. As of the first one I believe that everybody knows what it is about. It is about the marathon-long and exhausting talks which were lead regarding the application of the Constitutional Court's decision on the constituent status of the nations. As some people have accounted, it seems that there were more than 100 hours of negotiations. Namely, an agreement was signed early this morning, which is a result of the national agreement in the line with the principle of ownership. The OHR welcomes with great satisfaction the agreement of the leading political parties about the application of the Constitutional Court's decision and considers it to be an excellent step forward in the process of democratic development of this country as well as further implementation and commitment to the rule of law. Also it is regarded as an important element for the better future of BiH. Most of the politicians seemed to have found strength to understand that the principle of ownership for their own destiny is the one that is characteristic of mature politicians, and not hiding behind decisions of other people. If BiH wants to become an equal partner in Europe, and I think there are no doubts that this is BiH objective, then there is no other way except the principle of ownership. And the High Representative thinks that significant progress has been achieved in terms of taking over that principle by the politicians. The text of the agreement itself has been forwarded to media early this morning. I am not quite sure if you all have received it, but if you did not you will probably get it soon. You can also contact our office. I believe that you know about details. Seven parties from BiH have signed this agreement. The parties from the Republika Srpska have had two reservations, which they set forth separately. HDZ did not sign the agreement while SDA did not show up at the negotiations. What is expected now is adoption of these Constitutional amendments by the Parliamentary Assemblies of the Entities. These amendments have to be absolutely in accordance with the agreement that was signed this morning. Once again let me clarify that everything that has been agreed upon and the principles which have been incorporated in this agreement are absolutely in accordance with the highest European standards. So much about it so far.

Secondly, we are going back to our region. It refers to the city of Mostar. Mr. Jean-Pierre Bercot, Deputy High Representative and Head of our Office OHR South, expresses his satisfaction with the rotation of the leading officials in the city, which took place two days ago and congratulates the new Mayor and new President of the City Council. Deputy High Representative Bercot also notes wise and constructive decision of Mr. Pintul to submit his irrevocable resignation in order to help resolution of the crisis in the City Administration. Now that some issues which were burdening the work of the City Administration have been resolved, OHR and Deputy High Representative Bercot expect that all officials of the city focus their full attention to numerous problems in Mostar and continue working jointly for the benefit of the whole population.

Clearly, one of the prevalent topics in this Canton is the topic pertaining to the situation with the Cantonal Government and generally with finances and budget. Regarding this issue, I will just announce and I would not like to say anything more about it, but only to announce that this afternoon the Head of our Office Mr. Bercot will meet Governor and Deputy Governor, the Prime Minister and his Deputy as well as Minister of Finance and his Deputy at the OHR premises. You will understand that in light on these talks we would not like to say anything more regarding the situation in the Canton at this very moment but rather wait until the end of the meeting. However, no special press statements have been planned but you can of course contact me or participants of this meeting afterwards should you have any additional questions. That would be all on behalf of the OHR for the time being.

Since Luka and the OSCE Mission have no particular statement for you today, I would like to give the floor to Dominique of UNHCR.

## **Dominique Orsini - UNHCR:**

Thank you very much. Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

Today, the UNHCR would like to focus on two incidents that happened recently. UNHCR received information that an Orthodox priest was harassed in Mostar Old Town last weekend. We strongly condemn this incident and expect that those guilty will be brought to justice.

UNHCR also strongly condemns the latest incident in Mostar North, which took place on the night of 21-22 March in the village of Kuti Livac when a criminal fire destroyed the house of a minority returnee, which was under reconstruction by UMCOR. UNHCR appreciates the efforts of the Mostar North authorities, including the police, in trying to find the perpetrators of this arson. UNHCR also expects that the police will thoroughly investigate the incident and bring the perpetrators to justice.

Thank you.

**Avis Benes - OHR:**

Thank you, and now let's give the floor to Kirsten of the UN.

**Kirsten Haupt - UN:**

Thank you. Good morning.

The first item that I want to speak about follows seamlessly to that what UNHCR was saying. I am referring to the incident that took place in the settlement of Kuti Livac, in the municipality Mostar North, where a house of a returnee police officer was on fire and severely damaged. Canton 7 Ministry of Interior experts have established that this was arson. As the UNHCR pointed out already, the house was under construction with the support of the NGO UMCOR. We join the UNHCR in strongly condemning this incident and calling on the police to continue their investigation in order to bring the perpetrators to justice.

In relation to another incident in the municipality of Mostar, North UNMIBH strongly commends the police for successfully completing the investigation namely into the incident related to the desecration of the Catholic graveyard in Dreznica. As you I am sure all know in the press release of the HNC Ministry of Interior it was stated that criminal charges were brought against 6 juveniles, who are all from Dreznica. Although the former Police Administration of Mostar municipality North always had better results in addressing such incident than other Police Administrations in the area, we believe that these above mentioned good results so far have directly followed from the establishment of a single Police Administration Mostar. As often juveniles are involved in these incidents, UNMIBH appreciates the attention that the municipality Mostar North is paying to this fact and welcomes the measures undertaken by the Head and the Deputy Head of municipality Mostar North, Edin Music and Kreso Primorac, to address the situation. They arranged, for instance, to meet with the Directors of all three elementary schools in the municipality Mostar North to discuss the need to address this problem. The municipality invited school directors to develop measures to promote the ideas of reconciliation, tolerance and coexistence among the pupils in their schools. In response to this initiative, school directors condemned all return-related incidents that happened recently in the municipality and outlined specific measures undertaken in their schools. Among those measures were lectures to teachers and pupils on subjects of tolerance and reconciliation. And teachers were asked to reinforce those lectures in their classes. And parents were also involved in this initiative. As it turns out it was exactly this initiative that brought the respective juveniles to admit their involvement in the desecration of the cemetery in Dreznica and to the solution of the investigation into that incident. Since return-related incidents committed by juveniles have also taken place in Trebinje area and other municipalities in Mostar area as well as in Stolac, UNMIBH hopes that other municipalities will follow this example of municipality Mostar North by involving parents and teachers and preventing juveniles in perpetrating such incidents. Municipality Mostar North has taken a clear stand on these incidents not only condemning them publicly but also going further and undertaking measures towards the prevention of such incidents in the future. It is also noteworthy that the municipality undertook to support activities towards the damage repair such as the building of a fence around the cemetery in Dreznica. Today, in the afternoon the municipality North has invited the media, as you probably know, to visit the municipality and see some of the locations of recent incidents but also return areas, reconstructed houses and other locations that would help promote understanding the current situation in the municipality.

And lastly I am also referring to the incident that was already mentioned by my colleague from the UNHCR. As no doubt you know, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March an Orthodox priest reported to the police that 4 juveniles had thrown stones at him while he was at the premises of the Orthodox Church here in Mostar. Already by Monday, the 25<sup>th</sup> of March, the police had identified the perpetrators and raised criminal charges against them. UNMIBH strongly condemns this incident and welcomes the prompt action of the police in helping bring the perpetrators to justice.

**Avis Benes - OHR:**

Thank you Kirsten. Before I give the floor to SFOR, let me tell that the OHR also joins other international agencies in condemning these incidents and welcomes rapid actions of police in cases where there was a rapid action. I hope that the media will respond positively to the invitation of the Mostar North municipality and visit Dreznica today, which should in some way contribute to improving the safety of returnees.

Now I would like to give the floor to Major Lebrun of MND SE.

**Maj. Lebrun - MND SE:**

Thank you very much. Good morning ladies and gentlemen.

Today I have one statement about project Harvest – spring collection cleaning in 2002. As you know, project Harvest is SFOR initiative in close cooperation with local authorities, local police, armed force and IPTF which started in 1998 and planned to support the collection, the disposal and the destruction of all illegally held and unwanted weapon, ammunition, and explosive in private hands. In accordance with SFOR Commander and in order to make clearness you can find below the list of all weapons with or without any certificate and or license issued for military purpose, which are not longer to be kept by individuals. I do not want to read this list, you have one paper with all the details. But I want to add that it is the responsibility of all people in this country to be sure that all citizens are aware of this list and all citizens must be aware that since the 4<sup>th</sup> of March these weapons are now illegal.

Thanks.

**Avis Benes - OHR:**

Thank you Maj. Lebrun. And now of course your questions if there are any.

## Questions

**Q: Pejo Gasparevic (HINA):** I have a question for representatives of the two leading international organizations, OHR and OSCE with all due respect to the others, but I am deliberately asking for their opinion. Namely it has been confirmed here that the political parties from Republika Srpska had two reservations in regards to the agreement. The two most powerful national parties from the Federation, i.e. HDZ and SDA, refused to sign the agreement. My question is the following: taking into consideration these facts, what will be the real effects of this agreement in your opinion? Thank you.

**A: Avis Benes:** If I may start. We think that the real effects will be really significant. As for the two reservations expressed by the two parties from the Republika Srpska, they do not exclude the fact that all other principles from the agreement, which was signed, will be incorporated into the Constitution of the Republika Srpska. As for these two reservations, one was about the composition of the Government and the other one was the issue as to how one can decide on the vital national interest, whether through the Council of Peoples or the RS NA. As I said, I can give you the text of the agreement afterwards, but basically in the remarks parties themselves said: the remaining part of the agreement we accept as the base from which we will develop proposal of the amendments to the Constitution of the RS. When it comes to the other two parties, SDA not only did not sign the agreement but excluded itself for a period of time from the process of talks about it. As for the HDZ, they refused to sign the agreement and the OHR actually regrets that there was no constructive participation on their behalf. The fact that remains is that now the Entity Assemblies have to incorporate these principles and there is an opportunity of

course for the other parties to show that they are supportive of it through the voting process.

**A: Ludvik Skoberne:** I would only say that we also consider this to be an extremely important step forward leading towards the strengthening of democracy in this country and it illustrates the responsibility of the political parties to shape the political life in this country. Of course, we believe that the members of the Entity Assemblies will verify these amendments that basically must guarantee the equality of all three nations.

**Q: Mirsad Behram (RTV Mostar):** If other colleagues do not mind I have two questions for the OHR and one for the UN. First, it seems to me that the RS representatives do not agree on the two key issues. These two issues were disputable all the time and it seems to me that the rest of the agreement was not even discussed.

**A: Avis Benes:** This is definitely not the information which I have. The entire series of issues were discussed. We can now go through them one by one and once you see the agreement you will see to what extent the significant progress has been made. We, in the OHR, do not think that these two reservations were the key issues in this whole agreement.

**Q: Mirsad Behram (RTV Mostar):** Let's return to the local issues. Does the OHR plan to undertake any steps regarding the problems in this Canton, i.e. the recent case was announcement of bankruptcy of judges, before that there was a whole series of strikes on, as people like to say, both sides of the Canton – there was a strike of health workers, policemen, firemen, etc. of more-less all budgetary beneficiaries. You know yourself what problems exist in this Canton so does the OHR plan to do something about it?

**Question for the UN** – a man approached us this morning, I am not sure which neighborhood he is coming from but it seems to me that he is coming from Bare municipality Mostar South-West. He reported that his house was set on fire allegedly last night or yesterday. Also allegedly as he said the signs of swastikas were drawn over the house. Could you confirm or deny this information?

**A: Avis Benes:** When it comes to the second issue that you raised, it is clear that the work of many institutions in the Canton have been paralyzed and that the financial problems and problems pertaining to the budget are in the background of all these problems as well as those concerning the way of distribution of revenues. As I have already said, today afternoon we will have that meeting in which all these issues will be included in the agenda. As I also said, for the sake of constructive atmosphere in this meeting I would not like to say anything more about it.

**A: Kirsten Haupt:** Regarding this incident, yes we have some initial information. It is not detailed yet and we are still waiting for a proper report. As far as we know right now yes in the municipality Mostar South-West in the area of Cim, it might be the same area, the house of a Bosniac returnee was on fire. The house is not burned down, there is some damage but it is not very extensive. The entrance door was burned and the smoke has blackened the walls inside. It has not been established yet whether it is arson or not so you will understand that I am afraid to give any further comments at the moment until I know a little more. Regarding the swastikas that you have mentioned, I have not received that information at this point but I will inquire about it. So as you understand I have only this initial information and I would be jumping the gun if I went further and made any further comments on that. So let me please wait until I have the complete information and then I can tell you.