

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

	<b>Spokesperson</b>	<b>Topic</b>
OHR	Avis Benes	• Reminder of Seminar on Customs reform at OHR
OSCE	Richard Medic	• Education Issues Set Steering Board Group meets in Mostar • Roundtable on Discrimination in Employment • Correction of Vecernji List article on Stolac
SFOR	Maj. Fix	• No statement

### **Avis Benes - OHR**

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen and welcome to the press conference of the international organizations seated in Mostar. I think we will be brief today.

Today, on behalf of the OHR I have a brief point. It is a reminder of an event that is taking place in Sarajevo today. It is the seminar on Customs reform at the OHR's premises. It will gather representatives of all political parties that are represented in the BiH House of Representatives to address the vast problem of customs fraud and available solutions. On behalf of the International Community, this seminar will be attended by the Principal Deputy High Representative, Donald Hays, the Head of the Customs and Fiscal Assistance Office in BiH, Allan Jensen, and the Head of Economic Department of the EC Delegation, Renzo Daviddi. As you know, a month ago when the High Representative identified the major challenges that the new BiH bodies of authority are to face he mentioned six major priorities that have to be achieved within six months. Apart from the reform of the Council of Ministers, he considers reform of Customs Administration and introduction of VAT at the BiH level to be the most significant ones. At this moment, the level of fraud in the Customs Administration is what makes this reform necessary. BiH cannot afford losses that amount to hundreds of millions of convertible marks. Actually, on the annual basis criminals earn more money through customs than the state budget. This is not necessarily the mistake of customs officers who managed to increase the level of collected revenues of late. One of the basic problems is that of the existence of several customs' administrations in this country. What will be discussed and there will surely be questions about it is – can BiH citizens afford to have a system where criminals are more united than customs officers and whether the citizens of this country can afford to pay two customs bureaucracies while all countries have one. How will politicians act towards this problem will be one of the important tests of their seriousness and commitment to the reforms necessary for this country.

That's all on behalf of the OHR for the time being. I'll give the floor to OSCE and Richard.

### **Richard Medic - OSCE**

Dobar dan. Just three points from OSCE today.

The first is the media advisory. An extraordinary meeting of the Education Issue Set Steering Group (EISSG) will take place in Mostar today. The purpose of the meeting is the presentation and endorsement of the Education Reform Strategy Paper to the Entity and Cantonal Ministers of Education. The paper is going to be presented to the Peace Implementation Council in Brussels on 21 November. Another presentation will deal with the Implementation Plan for the Interim Agreement on Accommodation of Specific Rights and Needs of Returnee Children. Immediately following the meeting, Entity and Cantonal Education Ministers will sign the Implementation Plan. Media are cordially invited to attend the signing ceremony at 13:40 hours in the Federation Government Building, and a Press Conference following the signing of the Implementation Plan. I think Avis has something to add about it.

### **Avis Benes - OHR**

You will learn more about this issue this afternoon. Let me just say that the OHR has been intensively involved in general in the work of the Education Issue Set Steering Group and Senior Deputy High Representative Enver Schrömbgens will be present today at the meeting and the press conference. As Richard already said, this will be presented in the meeting of the Peace Implementation Council in Brussels.

#### **Richard Medic - OSCE**

The second point is a short media advisory. OSCE Regional Centre Mostar as part of its Fair Employment Project is hosting a round table on Discrimination in Employment, which started at 10.00 this morning at our premises. The round table will discuss the role of trade unions and mechanisms for protecting workers' rights from discriminatory practices as well as a single labour market in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

One more point from OSCE today. The Regional Center Mostar wishes to correct an error contained in an article entitled "Timberman: Crosses are responsible for the destruction of Stolac" published in the 12 November edition of Vecernji List. The claim that Regional Center Director Thomas Timberman addressed the 'Bosniacs who had gathered' at the Old Town Fortress in Stolac is false. The only people present when the Director made his statement in the Stolac Fortress were himself, two senior officials of the Municipal Government representing Mayor Obradovic, the interviewing journalist from FENA and two OSCE employees. There was no "Bosniak audience". The Regional Center has formally requested Vecernji List to publish a correction.

That is all from the OSCE.

#### **Avis Benes - OHR**

Maj. Fix does not have a statement on behalf of SFOR. Let me tell you that we were kindly asked by Cospe Italy organization to be given an opportunity to distribute their press release, which is available here. It is about the project for support to the economic development in the area of Mostar. For more information please contact Ms. Anita Bazina.

#### **Richard Medic - OSCE**

Excuse me, can I just add one more point. The press opportunity today for the EISSG will be at 13.15 not at 13.40 hrs. We are sorry if this puts anybody up.

## **Questions**

**Q: Pejo Gasparevic (HINA):** Question for Maj. Fix – Over the past two-three weeks local media are writing about the alleged meeting of 150 extreme Islamic intellectuals in Travnik. Allegedly, at this meeting the dzihad was proclaimed and the erase of the European race. Some findings are pointing that allegedly one part of these Islamic intellectuals from Afro-Asian countries arrived through Herzegovina. What does SFOR know about this?

**A: Maj. Fix:** The arrival of extreme Islamic from different countries in BiH is a major problem but it does not concern only BiH of course but all the western countries, also France and so on SFOR pays much attention to this trend and all the necessary monitoring is performed by our services. Concerning these individuals or this group you must understand that due to good progress and good investigation I cannot release details, or more accurate information.

**Q: Mirsad Behram (RTV Mostar):** Question for OHR – recently at one of these press conference you said that the work of the City Independent Legal Commission for illegal or more correctly disputable construction in the Central Zone should be more transparent. However, I am not aware if this Commission has said or released any information thus far. In the meantime as we can all see construction works have openly resumed at some of the construction sites, not to mention previous cases of breaks of official seal.

**A: Avis Benes:** OHR firmly remains on the position that the issue of illegal construction must be resolved by the City Administration. The establishment of this Independent Legal Commission was indeed one of the measures and levers in order to resolve this issue in a systematic manner. At this point of time, I am not aware that the OHR received information on results of the work of this Commission. Of course we expect them to be published as soon as possible. Since I have not been here for a while I cannot guarantee you this 100%. However, it is much more

important that the public is informed about results rather than the OHR.

**Q: Mirsad Behram (RTV Mostar):** However, the fact is that construction works resumed at some of these locations in spite of legal bans. What is your view on this?

**A: Avis Benes:** Our view is that all illegal activities should be halted and the City Administration should be the one to take appropriate actions in that regard.

**Q: Mirsad Behram (RTV Mostar):** Question for SFOR – the fact is that over the last couple of weeks you keep informing us about discoveries of weapons and ammunition in eastern part of Herzegovina. I can freely say that great quantities have been discovered so the question is what has been done over the last seven years?

**A: Maj. Fix:** What is important is not if we find more ammunition now than in the last seven years. But what is true is that SFOR troops have now a better knowledge of the area of responsibility and of potential places where ammunition can be stored. Moreover, SFOR receives more and more anonymous phone calls indicating or giving us tips about caches.

**Q: Ivan Bakovic (HTV Mostar):** I have two questions for OSCE. Could you please clarify for me this issue between Vecernji List and Director of the OSCE RC Mostar. What is unclear to me is the following – whether or not Mr. Timberman gave this statement or he did not state this in front of the Bosniacs.

**A: Richard Medic:** Mr. Timberman did make a statement at the Stolac Fortress. The point was that Vecernji List reported that Bosniacs had gathered around to listen to him make the statement. So that was really the correction, that is the only thing we wanted to point out.

**Q: Ivan Bakovic (HTV Mostar):** Was Timberman's statement that crosses are responsible for destruction of Stolac correctly reported?

**A: Richard Medic:** No – that is perhaps an exaggerated interpretation in the Vecernji List headline. At no point did Mr. Timberman mention crosses, or Catholics or Catholicism. And he certainly did not say that crosses are responsible for the destruction of Stolac.

**Q: Ivan Bakovic (HTV Mostar):** My second question – if I understood correctly today and at the last press conference the position of OSCE is that the cross should not be constructed at the announced location. I would like to know the following – is the position of OSCE that it is better to ban construction of any religious facility, no matter what – churches, crosses, mosques, monasteries, etc – rather than develop a spirit of tolerance among the people.

**A: Richard Medic:** I think we have to be careful not to keep dragging out this particular statement. I think the essential point is whether or not the building, reconstruction, rehabilitation or any other change to a national monument takes place legally. You're well aware of Annex 8 of the Dayton Agreement and that the Law on National Monuments has also been passed locally, so the fortress is one of the places on the temporary list of protected monuments. So in answer to your question – OSCE's attitude is that the Laws passed by the Commission for the protection of national monuments have to be respected, and any construction or changes to national monuments have to go through the Federal Ministry for Urban Planning and the Environment. The processes and procedures are there and OSCE wants people to respect them.