

Transcript of the Press Conference in Mostar

Press Conference

22 May 2002

Agency	Spokesperson	Topic
OHR	Avis Benes	· PL implementation in Eastern RS
UNMIBH	Kirsten Haupt	· Investigation into ammunition caches · Explosions in Mostar
		· PSC Trebinje operations against smuggling of drugs and goods
SFOR	Lt. Col. Rambaud	· Police Officers' Housing
		· Visit of French Minister of Defense to Mostar
		· Information about possible caches in Mostar
		· Presence of police vehicles in Mostar region

Avis Benes - OHR

On behalf of the OHR I have one short statement regarding the implementation of property laws in Eastern Republika Srpska.

The recent statistics from the end of April this year show that the trend has continued and that relatively satisfying progress has been achieved in the implementation of property laws. In regards to the municipalities of Trebinje, Bileca, Nevesinje, Ljubinje, Berkovici and Gacko, we have percentage of the property laws implementation between 50% and 80% and even 100% in Berkovici. Unfortunately, this process is not followed by the process of repossession of property. This is another problem that should be dealt with as well.

Kirsten Haupt - UNMIBH

I have few items for you today.

First, UNMIBH would like to commend the Herzegovina-Neretva Canton Ministry of Interior towards their efforts in investigating the case of the three ammunition depots that were discovered in and near Mostar recently. As you know, a first criminal report was filed last week against five former and current directors of the three companies where the ammunition had been found. UNMIBH appreciates the priority the Ministry of Interior of Herzegovina-Neretva Canton is ascribing to this case, which is only logical considering the enormous quantity of the ammunition discovered and the magnitude of the potential security threat to the population of Mostar and its surroundings. It is clear though that much more needs to be done. To that end, UNMIBH will continue to scrupulously monitor the investigation into this case and urge the Ministry of Interior to do their utmost to bring all those responsible to justice. In that connection I would like to comment on an information that was presented in the media yesterday, namely that additional criminal charges are being prepared against two individuals. While we certainly expect the investigation to continue and result in additional charges, this particular information was not confirmed by the Ministry of Interior.

To another item, last Sunday, 19 May 2002, early in the morning, there were two explosions at two separate "Derby" bet shops. These two explosions are part of a series of five explosions aimed at the property or business premises of the businessman Dinko Slezak. UNMIBH strongly condemns these explosions and urges the police to thoroughly investigate these incidents and bring the perpetrators to justice.

UNMIBH would like to commend Trebinje PSC on their recent successes in solving cases of drug trafficking and smuggling. Last week, namely on 15 May, Trebinje PSC arrested three individuals - two from Trebinje, one from Montenegro - for smuggling large quantities of marijuana and heroin. A little more than one kilo of heroin and more than 73 kilos of marijuana were discovered with these three individuals during the arrest at restaurant along the Bileca-Gacko road. Reportedly, this was the largest ever confiscated quantity of heroin in BiH. The drugs were supposed to be transported further on to Croatia or Slovenia. When searching the house of one of the arrested smugglers in Trebinje, a huge marijuana plantation along with illegally kept weapons and ammunition were found.

Criminal charges were filed against all three persons. Only four days later, on 19 May, two police officers of the PSC Trebinje confiscated ten kilos of marijuana on the road between Berkovici and Stolac. The drugs were hidden inside the doors of two vehicles. Two persons – one from Zenica and one from Kakanj – were arrested. Also in recent days, the PSC Trebinje was successful on several occasions to prevent smuggling of a number of goods. In one case, on 15 May two persons from Citluk were arrested when found carrying more than 20,000 excise stamps for alcohol amounting to a value of approximately 10,000 KM. These stamps are affixed to products indicating that import or other taxes had been paid for that respective product. Criminal charges were filed against those two individuals as well.

And lastly, I would like to use this occasion to refer to a decision of the High Representative that dates back to the end of last month. You may recall that the High Representative on 30 April 2002 decreed that the return of residential properties to returnee police officers in both entities should be prioritized. This decision is aimed at promoting the return of minority police officers to their pre-war homes which is important for the overall return process as minority returnees point to the presence of minority police officers on the local police forces, as a guarantee of their safety in their pre-war municipalities. In reference to this decision, UNMIBH would like to invite all police officers, including border police and court police, whose houses are occupied to contact UNMIBH in order to ensure that their property cases get priority. Police officers may come to any IPTF station or UNMIBH office to make their cases known and to ensure the implementation of this decision by the High Representative. Copies of this decision I can make available to you after the press conference.

Lt. Col. Rambaud - MND SE

I have three short statements for today.

Sunday 19th May 2002 evening and Monday 20th May 2002 morning, French Minister of Defence, Mrs Michèle Alliot-Marie paid a visit to French troops in Mostar. After her recent appointment to French government as Defence Minister, Mrs. Alliot-Marie, first woman in charge of this responsibility in France, devoted her first visit to French troops in mission abroad, to the Mostar Multinational Division South-East. During this visit, she met Major general Amarger, Division Commander, Major General de Goesbriand, French representative, Mr. Bajolet, French Ambassador in BiH and Mr Bercot, Head of the OHR in Mostar. She took also advantage of this visit to meet the French contingent. Before her departure, she called upon French soldiers to continue their mission with the same dedication as before, and thanked them for their hard and efficient job in favour of peace and progress in BiH.

After the discovery of three caches in the past weeks and knowing that all illegal ammunition remains hidden in Mostar region, MND SE is still carrying on searches and investigations. Several visits and contacts have been made in the area but without any substantial results for the moment. MND SE Commander renews his appeal to all people having knowledge of illegal weapons or ammunition hiding places to report to SFOR units. You have to help yourself and your children to grow up in a secure country.

There were some indications that possible SFOR presence might have been requested. However the whole thing has been canceled and at the moment all police vehicles you could have seen in town left Espana square and came back to SFOR base. This is all what I can tell you at this moment.

Questions:

Q: Tina Jelin (Studio 88): Some news agencies reported that the OHR is considering a possibility of removals of the cantonal officials? Could you tell us if the OHR is taking such a possibility into consideration?

A: Avis Benes: At this moment, the OHR can neither confirm nor deny such possibilities. In any case, as you are all very well aware, if there are any moves, they are not being announced in advance. In regards to the work of the cantonal Government, the focus of attention should be not so much on speculations on their removals but on what they can and have to achieve in the forthcoming period. As you all know, the issues that are ahead of them and that are their tasks, that should have been resolved a long time ago, that they promised to resolve – most of these issues have not been resolved. This has provoked our reaction last week. I believe that you are all aware of the priorities – unification of the Ministries, adoption of a joint budget and in general search for a long-term solution for the financial crisis that this Canton is faced with.

Q: Pejo Gasparevic (HINA/BBC): I would like to ask Mr. Rambaud if he could tell us something more about the indications for which SFOR presence might have been required this morning in Mostar?

A: Lt. Col. Rambaud: As I told you before, the presence of SFOR might have been requested and what we were waiting for did not occur. So this mission has been completely canceled and all the vehicles returned to the base.

Q: Pejo Gasparevic (HINA/BBC): The second question – is the visit of the French Ministry of Defense to Mostar a part of the newest international plans and efforts to finally arrest Radovan Karadzic since there are numerous indications that he might be hiding in the area of responsibility of your Division?

A: Lt. Col. Rambaud: The visit of our Minister of Defense, Mrs. Alliot-Marie, was only dedicated to French troops. As you know perfectly she has been appointed only three weeks ago and this was her first trip to see French troops abroad in mission. We are French soldiers, we have no discussions on politics.

Q: Mirsad Behram (RTV Mostar): A question for the OHR. Actually, I would like to get more details on something that you have already been talking about – work of the Cantonal Government. There have been a number of accusations in the media as to who is the one to be blamed for the current situation and therefore I would like you to clarify the situation. What is happening with the unification of the Ministries? As far as I know, the next cantonal Government session is scheduled for tomorrow so I would also like to ask you what do you expect from tomorrow's session?

A: Avis Benes: From tomorrow's session of the Cantonal Government the OHR expects concrete moves and concrete agreements which will be respected. We hope that the approach to the resolution of these two problems will be more constructive. So maybe we should leave it up to them to resolve this problem tomorrow. As far as these media writings are concerned – as to who is to be blamed more or less – in principle we said that we consider both Mr. Macic and Mr. Coric responsible which does not mean that they are the only persons who obstructed processes and that they are the only persons who could be blamed for failures of these processes. However, their functions and signatures on documents hold them as the ones who should assume responsibility for the processes.

Q: Mirsad Behram (RTV Mostar): Question for UN. Allow me to think locally. In regards to the explosions in Derby bet shops – the perpetrators used plastic explosive and something stronger, whatever, it does not matter. The question is – who brought it, who used it, where was it taken from?

A: Kirsten Haupt: Would you want to change the job, maybe you should work for the police. That is exactly the questions they are asking. I cannot give you the answers to that but I am sure that investigation is trying to find answers to exactly those questions.

Q: Marko Markovic (Dnevni List): Question for SFOR – could you tell us what kind of operation was supposed to be carried out this morning in Mostar? You have to be aware that any of your operations is disturbance for people. Was it a question of a visit of certain VIP, Mrs. Toby Robinson maybe? Secondly, there are some information that SFOR members were aware of the caches in Vrapcici area during 1998. and 1999. and that it was discovered at this moment for political reasons in order to eliminate two main national Bosniak parties, namely Party for BiH of Haris Silajdzic and SDA, from the electoral race for the upcoming October elections?

A: Lt. Col. Rambaud: Do you have another one? First question – why vehicles and etc. As I told you, we could have been requested and we were not requested. This mission is completely canceled and obviously I cannot answer what exactly this operation was about. That's it.

Second question was about if we are waiting for somebody? I answer in the same way as for the first question – I have no comments on this issue.

About Vrapcici cache in 1998 and 1999 – you do not have a good information because it was 1996 and 1997. As we read in the newspapers, we removed 2.879 mortar shells from Vrapcici to Vogosca. And these shells were present in Vrapcici factory. They were only the visible ones. They were not hidden in the basement. SFOR does not have eyes to see through the walls.

And the last question about politics – we never discuss about political matters.

Q: Marko Markovic (Dnevni List): The story about these 2.897 mortar shells that SFOR moved to Vogosca from Vrapcici is clear to me. The information you have is not correct as I have information that either in 1998 or 1999 SFOR knew about the two caches in the area of Mostar.

A: Lt. Col. Rambaud: I think it is completely wrong. Had SFOR known, SFOR would have removed them.

Q: Vlatko Menix (HTV Mostar): Mr. Rambaud, you and the OHR are leaving residents of Mostar without the information about this morning's operation. I would like to know what is concretely happening? What is concretely happening when your tanks, vehicles, helicopters are operating in Mostar and when all journalists present here today are not able to inform the public about the truth? Does it mean that the public will be deprived of information during the forthcoming operations as well, especially in the city of Mostar?

A: Lt. Col. Rambaud: Nothing happened this morning. We were waiting to react but nothing happened, so we came back home in our base. There was no disturbance for the population, there only stopped in Espana Square. And now everything is finished and nothing happened.

Q: Svetislava Maric (Croat Radio Mostar): The population is disturbed because of information that there are 4.000 more mortar shells hidden somewhere in Mostar, which you presented at the last press conference. What are we supposed to tell them today, after today's press conference? Nothing – again?

A: Lt. Col. Rambaud: We are also waiting for your help. This is your town, your country and we need information. We are coming from abroad and do you think it is very easy to find all these caches in another country? You have to help and give us information.