

Transcript of the Press Conference in Mostar

Participants:

Jean-Pierre Bercot - Head of OHR South

General Maurice Amarger - Commander, MND SE

Avis Benes - Spokesperson, OHR South

Richard Medic - Press Officer, OSCE RC Mostar

Jean-Pierre Bercot - Head of OHR South

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen. My statement is divided in three parts. I shall start immediately with the first one regarding the non-acceptance of resignations of the Bosniak part of the Government.

Two days ago the Herzegovina Neretva Canton Governor and Deputy Governor finally decided on the resignation of the Bosniak part of the Government by refusing to accept these resignations. I welcome this act of clarifying the position of the members of the Government, although it was long overdue. The resignation crisis lasted for a month and a half, and too much valuable time has been lost. I expect that in their future moves, the cantonal officials will show more political responsibility. I refer in particular to the issues of a joint budget and the merging of ministries, processes which should have been completed by now. From now on, I expect true and dedicated work from cantonal officials, especially on these two issues, and an end to all political games. I and my office will continue to facilitate this process for the benefit of all citizens of Mostar and of the Canton, but elected officials are those who bear responsibility for these processes.

Second part of my statement concerning weapon storage in Mostar. In relation to another finding of illegal weapon storage in the Mostar area last week, a topic on which Major General Amarger will say more later, I would also like to express my and the OHR's concern over existence of such illegal storages, six and half years after the signing of the Dayton Agreement. These storages presented a serious security threat for all citizens of this area and I share the concern of citizens. I fully support the investigation conducted by the local police and expect these investigations to clarify who are the persons responsible for the storage of the weapons and that those found responsible will be brought to justice. It is of utmost importance that this issue be clarified and the public be kept informed on this matter.

Now, the third part of my statement is a correction of media article. Finally, I would just like to make a small correction related to one media article last week which stated that I met with Mr. Barisa Colak. For the record and for your information, I must say that in fact I have never met Mr. Colak.

This is it. Thank you very much.

Major General Maurice Amarger - Commander, MND SE

Good morning. As you already know, two big caches and a smaller one have been discovered in Mostar region in the last three weeks. First one in Vrapcici on the 24th of April, second one in Mostar Tobacco Factory on the 10th of May and on the 11th of May in the Unis Telecom compound, the smaller cache. In these three illegal dumps, more than 9000 x 120 mm mortar shells, 3 tons of powder bags, two booby traps and many other types of ammunition have been found in a very few days. All these ammunition have been or will be destroyed by SFOR in the days to come.

You have to be aware that they represented about 110 tons of dangerous explosive devices that could have

caused enormous damage in these very dense populated areas. I would like to remember you that a single 120 mm mortar shell, of about 11 kg, could kill everybody in a 100 diameter circle and is dangerous up to one thousand meters.

According to our sources we know that up to 4000 other 120 mm mortar shells still remain hidden in Mostar region. It is totally irresponsible for the people to live with this permanent threat in their surroundings.

I will say that so far we have worked in total co-operation with your national local authorities. Federal Ministry of Defence is working at its level to collect necessary information that would lead us to the discovery of the caches, as it was done for the Tobacco Factory. I know that there are people with enough common sense to act in the right direction.

I will again strongly urge all people having knowledge of illegal weapons or ammunition hiding places to report to SFOR units. Information will be handled with complete confidentiality.

And now I would like to show you on the map on the right the effect of this dump, the effect of these other 4000 shells in the Tobacco Factory exploding by accident.

On the spot itself, there will be 100 meters diameter crater. This crater would be deep between 15 and 20 meters. Then we have what we call the death-zone between the spot and 500 meters, particularly all the people, unprotected persons would be killed and all the buildings seriously damaged by blast effect. After that what we call mass destruction zone between the 500 and 1000 meters. 80% of unprotected persons will be injured, and 50% of the buildings will be damaged by projectiles. Next, high dangerous zone between 1000 meters and 2000 meters. 50% of unprotected persons would be injured and 50% of the buildings will be damaged. All windows will be broken. And the last zone up to 4000 meters projectile range limit, dangerous pieces of shrapnel, hostile, injured and kill.

So it is really beyond common sense to have this type of ammunition in illegal dump in Mostar. The fact is that Mostar would suffer more that it has suffered during the war. It is up to you all, to the citizens of this country to understand that they cannot live with this type of illegal dumps.

Thank you.

Avis Benes – OHR

Apart from what Mr. Bercot stated, there is one more item on behalf of the OHR. There is the explanation of the High Representative's Decision on amendments to the Entities' laws on privatization of apartments in a written form below for you, so I won't elaborate on this one.

Richard Medic – OSCE

It's both unfortunate and ironic that I want to talk about is the problem of threats being made to journalists and editors. Particularly as it is barely two weeks since we celebrated the International Day of the Media.

Although the OSCE does not officially deal with individual cases of such threats, in my first two weeks as press officer I have taken a number of calls from local media concerning this issue. I therefore want to say two things:

First, the OSCE strongly condemns any form of threat made to any journalist or editor. Such threats strike at the very core of democratic society – a core which manifests itself in the media as what we all call 'freedom of speech'. Without such freedom we – all of us in this room – are surely doomed.

The second thing I want to mention is that if you, as a journalist or editor, have been threatened in any way, you

should immediately call the local police to report the incident. If, for whatever reason, you do not want to deal with the police directly, you can call the Free Media Helpline in Sarajevo, the number is 033 217 302. They will be able to advise you on the options available to you.

And, of course, please do not hesitate to call me should you have any further questions

Questions:

Q: Vlatko Menix (HTV Mostar): Question for Mr. Bercot and General Amarger. Taking into consideration all the horrifying consequences that that could have been caused by the explosion of the mortar shells which you have just illustrated to us, I would like to ask if the OHR and SFOR are intentionally protecting representatives of the Herzegovina Neretva Canton Government, officials of the Federation Government, in particular representatives of the Federation Government from 1996, since we now know that these mortar shells were manufactured at that time, and the representatives of the Ministry of Defence? We have not heard that you mentioned any of them in your statement.

A: General Amarger: Determination of the responsibility is part of the investigation but it is not my business. We let local authorities investigate the case. I am just underlying the danger of having this type of ammunition in the middle of town.

A: Jean-Pierre Bercot: To add what General was saying – what we can tell you that the investigation is going on. As already mentioned, General Amarger is fully in charge to clear all the spots, together with the national security force structure, police etc. And the other step now is to start the investigation at all the levels. It will be not only the concern of the internationals but also the national officials. They are also responsible to link all those related to these different depositions. I have no more explanation than the fact that the investigations are started and are going on.

Q: Tina Jelin (Studio 88): In 1995, when UNPROFOR entered the premises of the Textile Factory, when this was a factory for manufacturing weapons, they did not close it. It means that back in 1995, the international forces knew that this factory was manufacturing weapons. According to the information I have received, the closure was prevented with the fact that the factory was on the line of a de-militarised area, and it was therefore decided to simply let it go. This information was provided to me by the then BiH Army liaison officer. It means that the international forces were aware of this. Could you confirm this information? Secondly, can you confirm that the information about the cache in Vrapcici was given by the Federation Ministry of Defence?

A: General Amarger: No, not at all. Vrapcici cache was discovered by the workers of the factory by chance.

Q: Mirsad Behram (RTV Mostar): What about the Tobacco Factory? Who gave you the information about the Tobacco Factory?

A: General Amarger: The Federation Ministry of Defence.

Q: Tina Jelin (Studio 88): Now I need confirmation for my first question – were the international forces aware of this in 1995?

A: General Amarger: What I can tell you is that in 1997 the factory was closed, as the ammunition factory was closed. We made sure that remains of the shells, of the visible shells, were transferred to the governmental arms factory in Vogosca. But obviously we have not a capacity to see through walls.

Q: Pejo Gasparevic (HINA/BBC): For General Amarger – according to reliable information, the BiH Army was manufacturing different sorts of weapons and ammunition at 54 locations similar to the ones in Mostar. My question is the following: BiH and Croatia are putting the efforts together to organise the European Soccer Championship; BiH wants the Winter Olympic Games to be held in BiH again. This surely has to be supported as a noble gesture. However, can you answer if NATO can provide assurances to the Olympic Committee and UEFA that threats such as the ones in Mostar will be removed?

A: General Amarger: *[interruption]*... I am sure that nobody will invest in this country while they know

that they are sitting on a detonator (NB: audio not clear)

Q: Stanislava Maric (Croatian Radio Mostar): Can we say that Mostar municipalities with a Bosniak majority are the largest ammunition caches of the terrorist organizations in BiH?

A: General Amarger: I am not linking Bosniaks and terrorists. I do not see the question. I do not see the connection between the Bosniaks and terrorists.

Q: Mirsad Behram (RTV Mostar): General, you stated that there are 4000 more mortar shells somewhere in Mostar region. However, according to the information I received from a source who wished to remain anonymous, there were 50 such caches in entire Herzegovina in 1996. Have all these caches been discovered, registered and what can you tell us when will these 4000 be discovered?

A: General Amarger: They will be discovered as soon as the people of this country come to us to tell us where they are. And I hope that your anonymous source won't stay anonymous for long and won't be stupid that will come and say – yes, we know where they are.

Q: Mirsad Behram (RTV Mostar): Have these caches been reported to you by the local authorities?

A: General Amarger: No. We are acting only on information given. We are not going to go anywhere in the areas of the economic activity of this country, looking out, we do not do that, we are not the occupation army. We only go when we have the good information, we go and we check.

Q: Tina Jelin (Studio 88): You gave information that there are 4000 mortar shells more in the region of Mostar. People will be terrified by this information. I would like to know if this is your presumption or have you received reliable information to support this statement?

A: General Amarger: Yes