

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.

Before I start with my statement, I would like to say that I am really glad to greet and welcome our new colleague, new OSCE Spokesperson Mr. Richard Medic, on behalf of the OHR and other colleagues. We wish him a warm welcome and hope you would have a good co-operation with him as you had with his predecessors.

As for the OHR, today's statement pertains to the concern of the OHR and the Head of our Office in regards to the dire financial situation in this Canton. This statement will be available in a written form after the press conference.

Deputy High Representative Jean-Pierre Berçot and OHR South again express serious concern over the dire financial situation in Canton 7 as well as the lack of responsibility of elected officials. Unfortunately, the purpose of all measures undertaken so far by cantonal officials was only to solve some temporary and very short-term goals, without implementing any structural measures, which are the only way to reach a long-term solution. Numerous meetings with cantonal officials on the side of the IC and the suggestions given were basically abused by these officials to paint a picture to the public that something was being done, whereas effectively little has been achieved, which is a true disappointment for OHR. With such an attitude of the responsible officials, the financial and social situation in the Canton will certainly not improve, and it is especially worrisome that so much time has been lost without many concrete results. It is already May of 2002, but there is not yet a cantonal budget for 2002. The Croat officials have prepared a budget proposal, but the Bosniak officials have not even done this.

It is beyond comprehension that the cantonal officials can afford such a luxury, and that they only transfer their responsibility to 'the other side' as well as give people false promises. It is time that local officials get down to the real issue - strengthening public finances, and improving the climate for investments and job creation in the region. This has to be done jointly and for the benefit of all citizens of this Canton whose interests local officials are to safeguard. In connection to this, it is also appalling that the process of merging the cantonal ministries, which was officially endorsed by the Cantonal government in a co-signed Action Plan on 26 February 2002, has come to a complete standstill. None of the parties involved have shown much interest in its realization.

As a reminder, OHR has not imposed any of the above and has acted only as a facilitator between both sides. However, it seems that the financial crisis in the Canton was used as an excuse for non-action, despite the precisely set deadlines and very concretely designated premises for each Ministry. It should be noted that a successful merging would also be a step in the rationalization of expenses of the Canton, without which there is no other feasible solution. Unfortunately, at the moment situation is quite the opposite — just to list a couple of paradoxes:

The Ministry of Health, Labor, and Social Care was supposed to be merged into a building on Lacina Street by 10 March 2002. This was done only partially, as a couple of secretaries did move, but not the minister and his cabinet. As a consequence, the Ministry of Construction, Urban Planning and Environment, as well as the Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sport couldn't be merged in Djacki Dom by its deadline on 15 March 2002.

Another interesting case is that pertaining to the office of the Cantonal Assembly President. Three offices in the new building opposite the Cantonal court building in the Central Zone, have been vacant for more than three months now for the Assembly speaker and his cabinet, who still occupy additional space on the east side of the Neretva. This causes duplication of costs for no particular reason, is a waste of taxpayers' money, and demonstrates an unwillingness to rationalize public funds.

Finally, it should not be forgotten that for a month and a half now, part of the Cantonal government is in resignation. This certainly is not the most effective way for them to be fully dedicated to their duties. OHR South eagerly awaits a decision from the Governor and Deputy Governor on whether they will accept or reject the resignation of these government members. OHR also believes that this situation must be resolved as soon as

possible in a legal and professional manner since the present stalemate is certainly not in the best interest of the citizens of this Canton.

Again, all those who expect the International Community to solve this situation for them without their constructive efforts, are greatly mistaken. Local officials should take significant and unambiguous steps towards rectifying the current dysfunctional situation before any International Community's technical assistance may be provided.

I think this statement of the OHR is very clear. However, should you need any additional clarification do not hesitate to ask.

I have two more reminders on behalf of the OHR.

OHR would like to remind that not too much time has left for the registration of political parties for the forthcoming elections and expects that all parties which have intention and wish to participate at October elections will register until the expiration of deadline according to the law and the electoral rules. OHR is indeed interested that all the parties that wish and, especially those who had so far certain support of voters and were expressing the will of their electorate, continue to be represented in the democratic electoral process in a legal way but of course this decision is up to themselves. This equally applies to all the political parties without exception.

Finally, the third item is somehow logistical. Principal Deputy High Representative Ambassador Donald Hays will be in Mostar on Friday, 10th of May 2002. The reason for his arrival is a two-day economic conference of International Business Forum at which Mr. Hays will address participants. In principal, no special press statements have been planned.

Richard Medic – OSCE

Firstly I would like to say hello to everybody. I've met some people here. Just one thing to begin with even though I do have some knowledge of the local language it will probably be a few weeks before I actually start speaking the language. I do not think I am comfortable enough yet with my role here so I want to make sure that I can answer your questions accurately. Another thing is I just want to make sure that everybody knows the OSCE press office door is always open, you are welcome to contact me any time, 24 hours a day. I trust most of you have my mobile number but I'll give it to you again should anybody need it. It is 061 144 304.

The first thing in regards to PLIP. This is reiteration of the statement recently given by the PLIP agencies in Sarajevo. PLIP condemns politically motivated attempts of war veterans and similar groups to postpone legal evictions, something which is undermining the rule of law throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina. Numerous political pressure groups, particularly war veterans and certain Displaced Persons associations, are violating the property laws by demanding to illegally remain in homes belonging to others, demanding free land, and demanding newly-constructed apartments. In fact, many of these persons have already repossessed their own pre-war homes or had them reconstructed with international funds.

Nevertheless, many public officials have been giving in to such demands or, worse still, have been actively encouraging them. When their demands are not met, these groups threaten or physically attack housing officials who are simply trying to carry out their legal duties. Public officials throughout BiH have failed not only to condemn these affronts, but also to prosecute the perpetrators.

Property law implementation is a crucial test of Bosnia and Herzegovina's ability to uphold the rule of law. We note that many public officials attempting to appease political pressure groups have not yet taken minimal steps to provide sufficient budgetary support for alternative accommodation.

Mature political leadership should not be afraid of undertaking difficult but necessary tasks such as property law implementation, and properly informing their voters about them. We expect public officials at all levels of government to act accordingly.

I just have one more point one final point. It regards an exhibition which was opened last month and will be on display tonight. It is called Trans-European Express. As I said, it was opened last month at the OSCE Regional Centre Mostar. It is open to the public now. The exhibition features sketches, paintings, and sculptures by a new breed of young artists from Mostar and all works are available for sale. Viewing starts tonight at 18.00 until 20.00. You have details here.

Thanks very much. That is all I have.

Lt.Col. Rambaud – MND SE

I would like first to introduce myself. I am Lt. Col. Rambaud, a French officer and I am the new Spokesperson of the SFOR MND SE.

I have a special statement for you today concerning the mortar shells found in Vrapcici Tekstilni Kombinat Mostar. As you already know on Wednesday April 24th 2002, 50 tonnes of explosive devices have been found in the basement of Vrapcici textile factory Djuro Salaj. This cache of ammunition was discovered by the workers of this recently privatised factory while they were working on its rehabilitation. The new manager immediately reported this discovery to the division and to local Police. On Thursday, April 25th, SFOR MND SE conducted a sweep of the factory for booby traps and other hazards to ensure no risks were posed to our soldiers and the general public. During this dangerous procedure which lasted 36 hours, the access to the site has been restricted. In total, SFOR discovered in excellent storage conditions, 4.054 120mm mortar shells, 850Kg of additional powder charges, fuses and cartridges necessary to the immediate use of the shells. The huge amount of ammunition and the real threat it presented to the safety of local Vrapcici inhabitants convinced me, that is the General Amarger, to remove it as soon as possible. In order to facilitate the investigation and to show evidence of this discovery, MND SE organised on Saturday, April 27th a media opportunity where it was allowed to visit and film the basement with the ammunition found before their removal to a safe SFOR storage site. Local police and IPTF were present. The destruction of these 50 tons of explosive devices started on Tuesday, 30th April in the presence of the local media and the Division has planned to end it on Saturday, May 11th. After the official request from the Herzegovina Neretva Canton Minister of Internal Affairs, MND SE passed to local police, through IPTF, all evidence, documents and photos collected by its military police and demining team. The removal of these 50 tons of explosive devices improved substantially the safe and secure environment of the region. But other caches certainly remain. General Amarger strongly advice all people having knowledge of illegal weapon or ammunition hiding places to report to SFOR. And he concluded saying “don’t let your children grow on a powder magazine”.

Thank you very much.

Kirsten Haupt – UN:

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen. The reason why we switched the order today is that I am following on the same subject that Lt. Col. Rambaud was talking about. I will not go into all details that have been mentioned either by him as well in the various statements of the Ministry of Interior. Just a little update. You know that the the Herzegovina-Neretva Canton Ministry of Interior has established a working group to investigate this case. Two crime inspectors from the ministry, one crime inspector from Mostar Police Administration and the bomb squad of the ministry are members of the team. The team will have at its disposal, as already mentioned, the entire documentation on the ammunition cache provided by SFOR. As I am sure you also know the Cantonal Prosecutor’s Office has forwarded an official request to launch this investigation.

Just two more remarks I would like to mention on this case.

The first is regarding the role of each organisation involved in this. The Ministry of Interior is the only institution that is carrying out the investigation into this case. There has been plenty of misinformation on the roles of IPTF and SFOR in this regard. Both, IPTF and SFOR will not be involved in any investigation. This is not their role. IPTF will very closely monitor the investigation in order to make sure that the investigation is carried out thoroughly and professionally. As already said several times, SFOR is the agency that has found the ammunition and recovered it and is providing all necessary relevant documentation to support the investigation. The second remark that I would like to make is that I would like to call on media representatives not to get lost in speculations. There has been plenty of that recently. The investigation started and it is ongoing. IPTF will monitor it very closely as I already said. UNMIBH has urged the ministry to expedite their investigation and, at an appropriate time, to come forward and to present the details and that sooner rather than later. In the meantime, let the team do their work and proceed with the investigation.

Secondly, an issue that is actually going on all over the country and has now started also in Canton 7 – that is system analysis. Yesterday UNMIBH has started this project in the Ministry of Interior of Herzegovina-Neretva Canton. UNMIBH officials met yesterday with about 50-60 officials of the Canton 7 MoI, representing the high and mid level management, to introduce this project of System Analysis.

The project seeks to complement the personal integrity checks of individual police officers with an analysis of the institutional organization and structure of the police force. The system analysis exercise will identify strengths and weaknesses in the organization of the ministry with the aim to help improve the efficiency of the police. All key areas within the ministry will be examined and analyzed, including operations, finances, job descriptions, book of rules, cooperation with the courts, internal control mechanisms and others. Recommendations will then be put together that identify changes to be implemented by a so called change management team which is comprised of four to five senior police officers. The goal is the accreditation of the Herzegovina-Neretva Canton Ministry of Interior as the police force that meets basic standards of democratic policing.

Thank you.

Questions

Q: Zoran Kresic (Croat Radio Herceg Bosna): First of all I would like to react to something that was mentioned in the statement of Kirsten, and it is going to be linked to my question. In a way, you have called on the media not to get lost in speculation. First of all, for almost ten days police have not been directly involved in the investigation of what happened in Vrapcici. I would like to know why that was the case. If Mr. Rambaud has a response it would be interesting to hear. Why were the police not involved? A common procedure is that the police carries out an investigation and we understood that perfectly. However a speculation that has appeared is that SFOR did not trust the police. Additional question – did you trust the police or not? Why has the police not taken its responsibility from the very beginning?

A: Kirsten Haupt: First of all, you do not have correct information. I know through IPTF that the police was there on the very first day when SFOR actually went to the spot. When SFOR entered this facility, the storage place, they discovered that there were some booby trap arrangements at the spot. As Lt.Col. Rambaud pointed out already this has been a very big threat to overall security in this area and for that reason after discovery of those booby traps this area was closed off for a limited period of time. We have to admit that this has given room to some misunderstandings between SFOR and the Ministry of Interior. Those misunderstandings have been removed very quickly afterwards. There was a general understanding of the necessity to have this area closed off for security reasons and that was fully understood by the Ministry of Interior as well. So following this initial phase, full co-operation was established. As you heard already, documentation has been already handed over and now I understand that there is more to come. That is provided to the police and particularly to this investigation team and is now ongoing, and we will have to see what will come out of this.

A: Lt.Col. Rambaud: I completely agree with Kirsten. I would like to precise (sic) some points. First of all, the Director of the company phoned directly to SFOR and to the local police. We met together, local police and SFOR, directly at the factory on the first day, 24th of April. Due to security reasons, as mentioned by Kirsten, we decided to restrict the area during the checking of these booby traps and other devices. It was only during these 36 hours that it was not allowed to enter the factory. And after that all, as pointed out by Kirsten and me before, everything was all right.

A: Kirsten Haupt: Two more things. First of all, this restriction of access was fully in the interest of the local population in this area, and I hope you understand that. The situation at that period of time had to be dealt with by specialists. There were tons of explosives there ready to go off if you want. And the second remark I would like to make – even during that time of restriction, the local police was somehow included in that by making sure that this restriction was upheld outside of the direct premises. I hope that this information clarifies a little bit more.

Q: Zoran Kresic (Croat Radio Herceg Bosna): Could I add something? Namely, it is clear to me that the police officers in blue uniforms were securing the area but as far as I know the first investigative team of the Ministry went to the factory in Vrapcici last Friday, which means eight days after the discovery. Investigative documents from SFOR were handed over to the police on the 5th of May, which is approximately 10 days after. In the meantime these documents were with SFOR. Were there some additional booby traps that SFOR had to deactivate in the meantime or was there some other reason?

A: Lt.Col. Rambaud: During the investigation SFOR discovered two hand-grenades between the boxes of mortar shells. Our specialists of the de-mining team said they were not real booby traps very dangerous for the

whole storage site. But they were placed in the basement in order to avoid someone to enter in. That is the reason why we needed 36 hours to check all the boxes one by one. There were more than 2000 boxes.

A: Kirsten Haupt: He was asking about a delay between the initial discovery and the first arrival of the investigative team on the spot. That can be explained by two more facts. First of all, the ammunition was removed to the safe area by SFOR and that took some time. And then of course some official communication had to be launched in between the two organizations, institutions – Ministry of Interior and SFOR. You know, official request had to be launched and agreed on, procedures worked out on how to access the site, how to go in and look at the explosives, and so forth. That would explain the delay. Let's not forget that there were some holidays in between the two. It is not an excuse but it is an explanation.

A: Lt.Col. Rambaud: I would like only to add that the local police and the IPTF visit all the boxes, all the containers in the SFOR storage site and SFOR gave all evidence, as I have mentioned before, of the investigation in this issue, that is the military investigation.

Q: Pejo Gasparevic (HINA): I have been following this case for the last 15 days and there was a real lack of official information. It turned out that journalists knew more about the whole situation than SFOR and IPTF.

A: Kirsten Haupt: I do not think so.

Q: Pejo Gasparevic (HINA): It was a joke. Could you convey a reassuring message today that the danger of a potentially dangerous explosion does not exist any longer? Additional question – what are the potential new ammunition caches mentioned in the press statement of the Commander of your Division?

A: Lt.Col. Rambaud: In Bosnia and Herzegovina if we discover today one cache, and another one a day before, and another one some day before then probably there are others. *(end of tape)* Answer to your first question – I can assure you that there is no danger today and all was removed from the Vrapcici Djuro Salaj factory.