Follow-up to the violent incidents in Banja Luka and Trebinje

Alexandra Stiglmayer, OHR Senior Spokesperson (AS): Hello again, I already saw you all this morning. Sorry for us being late. The High Representative had a very important meeting this afternoon about which he will talk, and it took longer than expected. Ambassador, if you could please start.

The High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch (HR): It has been a long day today because I had a Steering Board meeting this morning till about three o'clock and then I had another meeting. The main purpose of this press conference is to address you with regard to the terrible events in Banja Luka and Trebinje, and inform you what we are planning to do.
Firstly, I would like to assure you that the entire International Community, here as well as abroad, is utterly disgusted and shocked about these terrible events. This morning, the political directors of the Steering Board met here in Sarajevo, and we all share the same opinion. We had a long discussion about it, and we all have the same opinion.
This is not just a glitch in the peace process, but has revealed a deeply rooted malaise in eeply rooted malaise in the social fabric of the Republika Srpska, and the failure – or intentional unwillingness – of the leadership of RS to deal with it.
We, the international community, are going to tackle this problem, and this is for sure. Of course, you all know that this is not a protectorate here and that the peace process requires the engagement of the local authorities. However, I can promise you that we are going to do what we can in order to tackle this problem.
I have heard some people even wonder whether they should leave

Bosnia and Herzegovina now, returnees are frightened, people draw comparisons to the times just before the war broke out in 1992. Although I understand such thoughts and fears, I would like to tell everybody that this is not 1992, nor will we, the international community, to allow it to become 1992. It is the clear opinion of the international community that these are the last attempts of unreformed hard liners, ultra-nationalists and extremists to stem the wave and tide of normalisation and maintain their dream of mono-ethnic, chauvinist, criminal environment in which they thrive by nature.

In this context, I would like to read you a quote from the new Balkan director of the International Crisis Group, Mark Wheeler, which was reported in a Reuters story today. And it reads: "*Their bastions of power are being threatened, tened, and they are screaming in pain. The response should be more of the same,*" he said.

I can promise you that we are going to give them more of the same – that we are going to continue to fight chauvinism and violence in this country. This afternoon, I met with the leadership of the RS – President Sarovic, Vice President Cavic, Prime Minister Ivanic, the Speaker of the Parliament Kalinic and a number of RS Ministers – in order to discuss the situation.

I told them very clearly that they bear responsibility for the outbreak of violence in Banja Luka and Trebinje. They, the leadership of the RS, have never demonstrated leadership against extremism, never supported the rebuilding of mosques, never forcefully dealt with hundreds of return-related incidents, and never condemned publicly the war crimes committed in the RS during the war. I told them in no uncertain terms what the International Community, what I expect now and immediately of them:

- that they identify and punish with maximum sentences the perpetrators of the violence in Banja Luka and Trebinje,

including the organisers behind the scenes;

- I expect those who are politically responsible for the security to draw the consequences;
- the political leadership needs to forcefully, publicly condemn these events and publicly apologise;
- they need to ensure peaceful cornereful cornerstone laying ceremonies in both places as soon as possible;
- they have to initiate a government programme on democratisation, reconciliation, education of the police and of the wider public and particularly of the youth;
- they finally have to face up to the war crimes committed in the RS during the war, and that of course could include such things as an inter-ethnic commission dealing with these events, and above all genuine forthcoming co-operation with the War Crimes Tribunal;
- also, you know, we are preparing the Srebrenica memorial and cemetery site, and I have asked them to fully and publicly support of the construction of the memorial and cemetery in Srebrenica;
- further, the distancing from the war criminals, the active engagement of the local authorities to get hold of the accused war criminals. Not a single one has been accosted by the local authorities, which is another point that I made;
- that they actively support return, welcome the returnees, provide them with the necessary livelihoods;
- that they commit themselves to BiH's statehood and fully support the state institutions of BiH;
- and finally, I have asked them to form a high level multi-ethnic group that will deal with the strategies and actions for reconciliation and reform.

All those points that I outlined need to have a follow up, and I appointed appointed Deputy High Representative Georges Bordet, the head of the Banja Luka office, to start the work with them and monitor and oversee the work as of tomorrow morning. I want to see results immediately. One point that I

want to make, and this in no uncertain terms: I will not hesitate to use my powers to the fullest extent.
As I said, the Steering Board political directors were unanimous in their condemnation and disgust of the events in Banja Luka and Trebinje. We, of course, discussed many other issues, which are outlined in a Communiqué by the Steering Board, which you can find on the table outside, I hope.
I would like to mention two important issues: the Steering Board political directors again condemned and rejected the illegal and unconstitutional declaration the so-called Croat "self-rule" and expressed its full support of our strategy here. This means that there will be no negotiations with anybody representing the illegal structures because the request that the illegal attempt must be abandoned is non-negotiable. Negotiations can only take place within the established local institutions.
We, however, are ready for dialogue and talks about the legitimate concerns of the Croats in BiH, but again I would like to stress they must take place in the legal institutions and between the legal representatives when it comes to negotiations.
The Steering Board also welcomed the initiative for dialogue presented to the Steering Board by President Karlo Filipovic on behalf of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina.
Secondly, this was another issue discussed at the Steering Board political leaders meeting, and that is return. I am greatly encouraged by the minority return figures for the first three months of this year. There has been a 100% increase, as you already know, and we have now 15,500 in the first three months as compared to 7,400 last year.
But the Steering Board noted that the recent acts of intimidation and violence against returnee communities and the failure of local authorities to act decisively threatens continued progress. State, Entity and local governments must demonstrate greater leadership, promoting returns through the acceleration of property repossession, greater co-ordination is asked for between the State and the Entity authorities, and

the strengthening of the rule of law.

The Steering Board also strongly recommended that donors continue their financial support for these return programmes. And now I would like to open the floor to questions.

Questions and Answers

Ankica Posavljak, HRT: Mr. Petritsch, you said you would not hesitate to exercise your powers. What do you mean bo you mean by this? Do you think to exercise your powers by removing the local politicians, as there is a consensus in international circles that Messrs. RS Premier and RS President were responsible for the past events? Are you considering removing them perhaps?

HR: As I have said, I will not hesitate to use my powers to the fullest extent. I believe this is such a serious situation that everything is possible. This was the reason why I invited the leadership to come, I shared with them my impressions, and I put this in no uncertain terms. What I am asking for, what I have asked them is to act politically in the first place, and this is what I am looking forward to.

Yasin Rawasdeh, Kuna: As you said – the list of duties that you gave the leadership of RS, did you place a deadline on the measures to the leadership for these to be implemented?

HR: This is of course a very ambitious programme, in fact it is a programme for reform and reconciliation in a country which for so long has not really tackled these issues. So this in a way is a fresh start into something that now needs to come. The leadership knows: now or never. So some issues will be put in place immediately of course, like those dealing with the perpetrators, other issues like thorough education reform, of course, will take much longer. What is important is tt is that this process will be now established. It will take a while. We will set up a very clear monitoring system, which will make sure that these points that I have outlined here

will be realised in the shortest possible time.

Yasin Rawasdeh, Kuna: Past experience has shown that the leadership of the RS is polite and listen to advice, but do not put them into practise, so can the programme of returnees go on?

HR: They know that the time to listen and to nod is over and that the actions need to follow immediately or I will have to use my powers.

Said Hadziahmetovic, Glas Nade: Your Excellency, Ambassador Petritsch, I have a short question that you can answer briefly. But first of all, as the oldest of all the journalists here, on my personal behalf and on behalf of my colleagues, I congratulate you on the award you received in Zenica yesterday. Unfortunately, you will be able to use it only when you go back to your own country. This is the Balkans, where it is more profitable to be a fascist than a humanist, because fascists receive wonderful awards from 100 up to several million marks, depending on how much they have done. When your spokesperson Milisic was asked on Tuesday whether the HR intended to introduce a protectorate, he gave a negative answer, although I would like to have received a positive answer. swer. You have already been asked by others, is it a solution for you to withdraw and let us in the Balkans enter into a fight to the very end, without any observers, and so that this interrupted war gets a winner, and that that winner may write his history. Or are you going to really take rigorous measures for the people not to be killed and to prevent children from throwing stones at the old people?

HR: Well, I do not think that this is the time to leave for the international community. I believe on the contrary that there are so many positive signs around that we and above all the people of this country and the new leadership have made a lot of progress. These events in Banja Luka or in Mostar or in Trebinje are simply indications that we are making progress

and that those ultra-nationalist and extremists do not like it. Now is the time to decisively fight back and to ensure the progress and the success for BiH as a democratic country. I can tell you, I deeply believe that this is possible with the people, with the citizens of BiH.

Said Hadziahmetovic, Glas Nade: I'd rather say, there is a proverb: "From your mouth into God's ears." However, on behalf of those like me, if this does not happen shortly, let us leave the Balkans, because without crutches, without interpreters, we can always give a hand to someone. It wIt will not be any worse than it is here for us.

Nerminka Emric, RTV BiH: Everybody has condemned what happened in Trebinje and Banja Luka. All international officials condemned the incidents, and there were many ambassadors there. Do you not think that what you have done is too mild? Actually, you have only sent out a warning.

HR: No, I believe that these problems cannot be resolved with counter force in such a way which is needed. I believe that we need to really realise now that this is situation that is such that it requires the utmost concentration on what needs to be done, and this is the programme of what needs to be done. Because you cannot exchange the people, you can only reform them, you can help them find the right way. The most problematic thing that I saw in these terrible demonstrations was the young people out there. We cannot exchange these – they are here for many, many years to come. These are the people for whom we need to do something in order to provide them with a better and also, of course, with a more democratic and humane life.

Nerminka Emric, RTV BiH: I have to draw your attention to something. When I mentioned your warning, I did not imply the use of force. What I wanted to say is that more responsibility should have been claimed.

HR: The leadehe leadership has taken on the responsibility, and they have now a last chance to prove that they will live up to the expectations.

Alexandra Kroeger, BBC: You spoke about the need to identify and punish the perpetrators. 14 of them have been sentenced by the courts in Banja Luka to sentences of imprisonment ranging from one month to one week. Do you consider this appropriate and will your office be reviewing the sentences?

HR: Definitely, we are going to monitor very carefully the whole process of sentencing, and then our experts will decide whether this is sufficient.

Alexandra Kroeger, BBC: But sentences of one month to one week for incidents in which 30 people were injured, one person is still in a coma, is this the kind of the response that you are expecting from the Banja Luka authorities, is this enough?

HR: I expect an adequate response, and as I said, we need to look into this, whether this response is adequate or not. I am interested in the perpetrators but also in the organisers. Who is behind this and whether these are the organisers, I have no idea. I do not know the details, but rest assured, we will insist that the maximum sentences be handed out.

Aida Cerkez-Robinson, AP: You said one of the tasks would be to face up to war crimes commitmes committed in the RS and to form an inter-ethnic commission for co-operation with the War Crimes Tribunal. Could you technically tell how that would work, what is to face up to war crimes committed in the RS, what do you expect them to do?

HR: That is of course first and foremost full co-operation with ICTY, which is not the case, has not been the case so far. That is of course the full involvement of the local law enforcement and judiciary when it comes to finding those who are accused of war crimes, and again the co-operation with the IC in this respect. Of course, that also means in a political

sense to finally start a public discourse about responsibility, about guilt and responsibility, the causes, consequences and what has happened there. I think this is a much broader issue, an issue which, as you can see, Croatia has started to deal with and which very, very slowly only, Yugoslavia is starting to deal with. This is something which has not yet reached the RS, and this is now the time to start such a process. This is what I mean by that.

Aida Cerkez-Robinson, AP: So basically you are telling them to arrest the war criminals?

HR: That is, of course, the gist of it, I would say.

Philippa Fletcher, Reuters: Will you be repeating the ceremonies that were halted by the violthe violence and if so, what changes will you make in the organisation to make sure that this does not happen again?

HR: First of all, these were local events – events which were organised by the Islamic Community in general, with the help of others. I have asked the RS leadership to now reach out to the Islamic Community, ask them and help them put in place what did not happen on Saturday or Monday, and have it done. So now it is up to the RS leadership to reach out to the Islamic Community to ask them, to discuss it with them and come up with a format that is such that the Islamic Community, those directly affected by it, can agree to. But I want to see the active involvement of the official RS leadership.

Philippa Fletcher, Reuters: Do you think it might have been avoided, if the RS leadership had been involved more closely the first time around?

HR: It is always very difficult to speculate, in hindsight everything looks a bit easier. But I believe it is of course the reflection of a non-relationship that exists between the different communities in the RS. This is actually the core of the problem, and my insistence is now that this be changed.

AS: Let us take two more questions because most of you have deadlines.

Dejana Radovamovic, RTRS: What is youhat is your comment on the intensified attacks on Serb returnees, and attempts to destroy Serb Orthodox Church in Sanski Most?

HR: I believe I have made it clear that I do not differentiate in ethnic or religious terms when it comes to the destruction of religious monuments or persecution of people. They all are human beings, and I believe it is not a good idea to say he is a Serb returnee and has been beaten up or the other is a Croat returnee and has been beaten up. They all are human beings, and together we should fight against this and be in no uncertain terms against this kind of destructive behaviour of hooligans who exist unfortunately among many groups of peoples.

Amra Kebo, Oslobodjenje: How did the leadership of the RS react to your requests, what did they tell you?

HR: The answer was positive, and we are starting the work immediately, which means tomorrow morning.

AS: Thank you very much.

HR: Let me just say, before you leave, one more thing. I believe that it is very important that we fully and directly address these very, very difficult issues, because in a way this really goes to the very existence of this state and the society of BiH. It is important to stress how relevant it is to continue to work on the establishment of the rule of law, o of law, on the institutions, on law enforcement, and I have an appeal: these are grave events, but please do not escalate them. This is an appeal to all three ethnic communities, and it is also an appeal to the media, in its reporting not to use inflammatory language. Occasionally I have seen such. You have a very responsible job to perform in these very critical days. Thank you.