Interview: Christian Schwarz-Schilling, High Representative for BiH: “Politicians Should Reduce Tensions”

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The High Representative, Christian Schwarz-Schilling, says that institutions must react adequately after the bomb attack on the grave of Alija Izetbegović and the video footage of a Serb soldier being killed during the “Storm” operation.

“Instead of speculating about who did this and who may benefit form it,” Schwarz-Schilling says, “the police and judicial authorities must find the perpetrators and punish them.”

He claims that politicians must cool their rhetoric, and avoid adding fuel to the fire.

NN: It is evident that the situation in BiH has become more radicalised during the last month and now the attack on Izetbegović’s grave has aggravated the situation further. Would it be true to say that certain politicians only added fuel to the fire with their statements?

SCHWARZ-SCHILLING: The reality has not become more radicalised; but politicians’ statements have. After the explosion on Alija Izetbegović’s grave we heard moderate and responsible statements from politicians such as Bakir Izetbegovic, Alija Izetbegović’s son, and RS President Dragan Čavić. The purpose of those statements was not to contribute to radicalisation, but to ascertain what really happened.

That is what I talked about with the RS Prime Minister Milorad Dodik on Tuesday, and we agreed that we must be calm and rational at a time like this, in order to avoid adding fuel to the fire. Now it is up to the institutions, namely the police and the judiciary, to discover the perpetrators of these evil deeds.

On the other hand we have politicians who choose to speculate about the reasons for the bomb attack on Alija Izetbegović's grave, linking this to an attempt to close the debate on the video footage that showed a Serb soldier being killed during the "Storm" operation. They are not contributing to anything good. The acts themselves – the murder recorded on videotape, and the attack on a grave, are heinous, and the institutions must make sure that perpetrators are brought to justice.

NN: It is a fact that the showing of the video footage and the attack on Izetbegović's grave led to homogenisation of the electorate among Bosniaks and Serbs, on the eve of the upcoming elections. Is it possible that tensions are being raised intentionally, because of the elections?

SCHWARZ-SCHILLING: I do not care to infer anything about that without knowing all the facts.

NN: The general impression, however, is that this situation only works to the benefit of radical forces?

SCHWARZ-SCHILLING: I do not know that. However, it is a fact that one should not make any comparisons between the dreadful footage of a murder during the "Storm" operation and the bomb attack on Izetbegović's grave. It is true to say that there have been attacks on cemeteries in other countries, including for example Germany – primarily attacks on Jewish cemeteries – but this cannot be compared with the sufferings of Jews in concentration camps. What happened in the cemetery could be a work of a mentally unsound individual or an extremist, but we cannot say anything until we know all the facts".

Rather than speculate, it is far more important to find the answers to the right questions; so for example, why the video surveillance cameras were turned off, who ordered that and so on. That is the kind of information we need, not speculation about who did it and why.

NN: Can the radicalisation of situation, which we have all witnessed lately, lead to postponing the decision on OHR closure, planned for the summer next year?

SCHWARZ-SCHILLING: The final appraisal will be published in February next year. I hope we have the experience to stick to the plan for OHR's closure. However, if there are failures in police reform, or the signing of the Stabilisation and Association Agreement, or the talks on constitutional reform, or in forming functional governments after the October elections, then we shall have reassess and see whether we will be able to complete the transition of OHR to the Office of the EU Special Representative.

If for example governments are not formed then we'll be faced with a choice; to follow the plan on closure, even though we do not have a government. This could mean a very uncertain future for this country. However, postponing the decision on the withdrawal of the OHR would inevitably lead to BiH slowing down on its European road, because the EU will not negotiate with a country under a protectorate. That is not the way to achieve sovereignty. In any event, we will see what will happen by February.

Election rhetoric

NN: Were the statements in which you called on politicians to reduce their rhetoric and "stop disturbing the public" on the eve of the elections strong enough to put an end to the verbal war we are seeing on the political scene?

SCHWARZ-SCHILLING: I believe it is much better for the media to do that because it would demonstrate that this country has matured. Politicians must be warned, and I have done what I can. Never the less, this country is not a kindergarten where I should be telling the children what to do.