Transcript of the Press Conference in Mostar

Avis Benes – OHR

Good morning ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the press conference of the international organizations seated in Mostar.

As you can see today, we have a slightly different arrangement. The idea of all of this is to be able to communicate better with the journalists and to see each other eye to eye. Also many of you have complained that the way we did it so far was a bit inconvenient. The idea would actually be that journalists and those asking questions sit more in the front and those who are observers to sit behind the cameras.

We would like to apologize once again for not announcing this before as this might cause certain difficulties for the cameramen but this will be the usual arrangement from the next press conference onwards.

On behalf of the OHR, we do not have any specific statement today but of course we are available for your questions.

I would like only to remind you, stress and to draw your attention to the fact that today at noon in Sarajevo, representatives of the five international organizations, including the High Representative Mr. Wolfgang Petritsch, will address the media. They will present the results of the property law implementation for the last year and all goals, plans and prognosis of all agencies included in the PLIP, for this year.

Now I would like to give the floor to my colleague Luka of OSCE who will stress something that the OHR wholeheartedly

supports and remind you of the deadline, which we have been reminding public of as well. It is important that the public is informed about this once again.

Ludvik Skoberne – OSCE

Good afternoon. We have prepared a press statement which is available in a written form and will be distributed to all of you afterwards.

Let me briefly say that the 28th February is approaching, which is extremely important for submission of claims for repossession of property.

As I said, we would like to draw your attention to the 28th February which is the final deadline for submission of claims for repossession of property and if this deadline is missed, the right on alternative accommodation will be lost.

Human Rights Department of OSCE Regional Center Mostar has prepared this press statement, which is available in a written form and you can get it afterwards. I would like to emphasize one thing. You do not have the right to alternative accommodation if you do not take all possible steps to try and repossess your pre war home. Under these new amendments, you will lose the right if you do not do the following:

– submit a claim for the return of your private property by February 28, 2002

– submit a request for enforcement of any decision you have received for the return of your property issued by the responsible housing body or by CRPC, by February 28, or within 60 days of receiving it.

The occupancy right holder nay file a claim for repossession of a destroyed or damaged apartment within six months of this Law entering into force.

Namely, once again I would like to emphasize that respect of this deadline is extremely important in order for you not to lose the right on alternative accommodation.

Avis Benes – OHR

Thank you Luka. Now I would like to give the floor to Kirsten of the UN.

Kirsten Haupt- UNMIBH

UNMIBH condemns in the strongest terms the recent incidents in Mostar. As you probably know, on Monday 11 February two explosions took place in West Mostar, one of them in an area of return. The first explosion rocked an apartment in Dr. Ante Starcevica Street at 10.50 in the morning. A Serb returnee who had repossessed his apartment in early January was moving furniture with the help of a Bosniac neighbour when an explosive device was set off. The Bosniac neighbour was slightly injured at his calf and had to be brought to hospital for medical treatment. The apartment had been temporarily occupied by a Croat. The second explosion took place in the same street at 21.10 hours in the evening. An explosive device had been planted on the second floor of a house owned by a Croat, which is under construction. No one was injured and the material damage is small. The police are investigating both incidents.

We have to reiterate again that UNMIBH will not tolerate violence in any form as a means to address problems. UNMIBH expects the police to robustly investigate both incidents and to bring those responsible to justice. UNMIBH considers these recent incidents as real test for the newly established single Mostar city police administration to proof their efficiency, competence and professionalism. Again, we cannot allow that renewed violence undermines property law implementation or the ongoing return process in Mostar city.

Thank you.

Avis Benes – OHR

Thank you Kirsten. And now to SFOR and Major Lebrun.

Maj. Lebrun – MND SE

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, today I have three statements: the first one is about the new issue of Phoenix magazine, the second is about the building demolition that will start the 18th February in Mostar, the third is about the inspection in underground facilities located in Svitava.

Phoenix Magazine is now produced in two versions: one in Latin characters and one another in Cyrillic characters. The number of copies will be two thousand for the Cyrillic characters version and three thousand for the Latin characters version. This change is the consequence of the comments by our readers who complained about the previous issues where articles in Latin characters and Cyrillic characters were mixed.

On 8th January, during a meeting in the mayor's office, the mayor of Mostar and his deputy requested the support of MNDSE to demolish a building in very bad condition which threatens public safety. This building is located in "Boulevard Narodne Revolucije" NR. 33 on Mostar's former confrontation line.

After a study and an appropriate reconnaissance, MNDSE decided to perform the task. In this way, MNDSE wants to show to BiH inhabitants that SFOR is an active actor in the reconstruction of the country. The demolition work will be conducted by the Divisional Engineer Coy and will begin on the 18th February. The demolition of the building and the cleaning of rubbles will last approximately one month.

A media opportunity will be provided, on 18th at 12.00 on the spot, to get an interview of the Spanish Engineer Coy leader, captain Rafael Alcazar, officer in charge of the demolition work. Media representatives wishing to attend this event are

to send back, via fax or E-mail to the PIO of MND SE, the media advisory, that you can find here.

During the night of Monday 11th February, MNDSE troops conducted an inspection in underground facilities of the power plant located in Svitava, fifteen kilometres Southeast Capljina and another in the company Energoinvest Armature in Capljina. According to information given to MNDSE, these facilities could have been illegal weapon and/or ammunition storage site. Capljina International Police Task Forces (IPTF) and BiH police forces were informed and assisted SFOR personnel. To enhance the fight against smuggling and traffic of weapons and considering that such illegal storage sites, if existing, would be a big threat to the safety of the country and to SFOR, MNDSE Commander decided to conduct immediately this inspection. Fortunately, after reconnaissance and search, with the understanding of the local employees, no weapons or ammunitions were found.

MNDSE Commander takes this opportunity to stress the urgent necessity to continue the effort undertaken last year during operation "Harvest 2001". Such an attitude is strongly expected again in 2002. The co-operation of everybody is essential to contribute to the safe and secure environment in BiH.

Thank you.

Questions

Q: Angelina Puljic (HTV Mostar): Your comment on yesterday's meeting in Stup?

A: Avis Benes: In any case, it is positive that people from HDZ have finally realized what is the right path – – return to the institutions of system -, something that the OHR has pointed out on different occasions. Namely, it is the

right path for accomplishment of all rights. As we know, discussion on the decision of the Constitutional Court will last for a limited period of time only. If other parties with, let me say, Croat prefix think that they would easily accomplish their rights by having a sort of joint front that is also something that the OHR supports.

Q: Mirsad Behram (RTV Mostar): I would like to refer to yesterday's meeting as well. What is the OHR comment on the fact that all Croat political parties, which have not been communicating with each other until recently, i.e. parties of different political orientations, set at the same table?

A: Avis Benes: It is not up to us to comment on their free will. I suppose that the motive for this was this key moment in BiH regarding the Constitutional changes. Probably, in this context some parties recognized that protection of some of these interests can be efficiently provided in this way. However, it is not up to the OHR to evaluate. It is their free will.

Q: Marko-Antonio Brkic (BIH Radio 1): Could you please comment on the current social situation in the city of Mostar and Herzegovina-Neretva Canton in regards to the situation of health and education systems, the issue of pensioners and their position and in general social welfare in this region? What is your position on welfare of people who are budget beneficiaries and who are dependant on Government's decisions, whose sessions have been interrupted several times?

A: Avis Benes: I will definitely not say something that is not known to everybody here and that is something new – the situation here is critical in many domains. For certain issues there are of course realistic reasons. Unfortunately, there are far too many things, some of them you mentioned, in which politics and politicizing are too deeply involved. When mentioning health, perhaps you gave me an opportunity to rectify some things concerning the current very agitated

situation in regards to the health insurance funds. It is necessary to mention this, as several representatives of the Herzegovina Neretva Canton authority have recently given wrong statements to a number of media, saying that the agreement pertaining to the merger of the health insurance funds of Herzegovina Neretva Canton and West Herzegovina Canton was reached with the OHR. On this occasion, we would like to deny that any agreement regarding the merger of funds was reached with the OHR, even though the OHR has been involved in several meetings dealing with this issue. On several occasions, we discussed reform of the health system and implementation on the Law on Health Insurance of the BIH Federation. Let me repeat once again the OHR position on this issue – it has not changed since the very beginning, it is very clear and consistent. The Law on Health Insurance of the FBIH must be implemented in all Cantons without exceptions. Simultaneously, responsible and competent authorities in HNC needs to offer adequate arrangements to ensure access to health services to the patients coming from West Herzegovina Canton. The access to health services should be provided on equal terms for patients from both Cantons. Unfortunately, concerning the merger of two health insurance funds or establishment of a joint account there has been too little compromise and too much politicizing. Obviously, the politicians can afford a luxury of being uncompromising at the expense of ordinary people.

Q: Mirsad Behram (RTV Mostar): Two questions for the OHR. I would like to know what is your position on – as far as we, the journalists, know Mostar City Council was in session last Monday. This session was held without a presence of journalists. Is this some kind of positioning prior to the rotation of Mayor and Deputy Mayor? For which other reason would they held an indoor session? The second question – I would like to have your comment on the two recent explosions?

A: Avis Benes: As for the first question, as far as we know the result of that session was election of Deputy Speaker of the Mostar City Council. Ante Vidacak was elected for this position. As far as the rotation is concerned, it will follow the rotation of Governor and Vice Governor, which means that the rotation in the City Council is connected to the rotation at the Cantonal level. I would not comment more than that.

As for your second question, we can only support the UN's position. In a way, we are also waiting for results of the investigation in order to be able to give our full opinion. In any case, if this first incident is connected to the return process, or if it is in a way obstruction of the return of people to their apartments, which is a possibility of course, this incident has to be condemned. However, this would also be a greater reason for concern. Of course, we hope that this trend will not continue.

Q: Alija Behram (RTV Mostar): Question for the UN – has the police interrogated the former temporary occupant of the apartment? Question for Ms. Benes – if the rotation is to follow, it is known that Mr. Tomic would need a support of the HDZ club of councilors. Does it mean that along with the act of rotation HDZ is returning to the City Council? As far as I know, Deputy Speaker elected on Monday is from the HDZ club of councilors.

A: Kirsten Haupt: I can understand that you have interest in an ongoing investigation into these two incidents by the police. But you have to also understand that we cannot give any details on what the police is doing or planning on doing in the course of this investigation. I mean we are very well informed about what is going on and what is being done by the police and we trust that they have undertaken right measures and steps to find out who is responsible for both of these incidents. But you have to understand that we do not want to give any room for speculations or any interpretations into these incidents before we have the final results of the

investigation. What I can tell you, though, is that all means available to the police have been utilized in the investigation so that proper results can be achieved, and as soon as we have them of course we will relate them to you. Again, we consider these incidents as quite serious, probably the most serious incidents seen so far in the very center of Mostar. So, we monitor very closely what the police is doing from that angle of course and from what I have said before – from the point of view that this is the new unified single Mostar police administration and it is, at this point, at the real test in the situation. Thank you.

A: Avis Benes: As far as HDZ and its participation in the Mostar City Council is concerned, as we all know HDZ has 11 councilors and they are a part of the City Council. Namely, they are a legitimate part of the City Council and it is their own choice if they do not want to participate, which we understand can only be detrimental for them and their electorate. As for the election of Mr. Vidacak, as far as OHR is informed, there has been nothing disputable about it. As for the rotation, I think that provisions of the Interim Statute of Mostar are clear and that rotation ceremony is a formality.