

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. As you know we have re-scheduled the press conference in order to help you to attend the ceremony of the hand-over of the Japanese Government's donation to the city transportation company. Once again, we would like to welcome this donation and establishment of the joint city transportation company. We hope it will function to the benefit of all citizens.

On behalf of the OHR, I have few very short remarks.

Once is a reminder of the announcement of the statistics on property implementation rate for January 2002, which were released in Sarajevo yesterday. Copies are also available here.

As of the end of January 2002, the overall implementation rate of the property laws has risen to 42% in BiH. That would be the average for the whole state. Percentages in the Federation and RS do still unfortunately differ – 51% in the Federation and 32% in the RS. As I said, detailed materials are available here and I would just like to add something regarding our Area of Responsibility.

One thing that we would like to praise and emphasize is the fact that municipalities Mostar West and Mostar South-West are nearing themselves to the 4% of monthly property laws implementation rate. Stolac is keeping a good pace – let me remind you that in the beginning of the last year Stolac had 1% property laws implementation rate, and it is currently 53%.

As far as eastern RS is concerned, apart from municipality Ljubinje most of the municipalities are above RS average, which should be higher. In OMI Trebinje and some other OMI offices we have new Heads and we hope they will accelerate this process.

Unfortunately, we have to stress the bad side of the process and emphasize once again that threats against some Housing Offices personnel continue as well as attempts of obstruction of property laws implementation, which is entirely impermissible. Also, we are concerned over the fact that perpetrators of some of the recent return-related incidents have not been brought to justice and we expect this to happen as soon as possible. This is all about the RRTF and the property laws.

My second issue is a reminder of an extremely important day in Sarajevo. The High Representative is meeting representatives of 8 political parties to discuss Constitutional reforms. These will be the final talks. This meeting will be a continuation of the talks that were held on Friday and which the High Representative evaluated as constructive. We all know that the timeline for realization of this process is the middle of this month and therefore there is a little time left. In relation to this, as you can see, the European Union issued a statement yesterday.

Also, among other press releases which are in front of you I would like to point out the re-establishment of the Free Media Help Line. There are the telephone numbers you can contact, which were previously under OSCE and the OHR is now continuing with task in order to provide continuation of this service for journalists.

This would be all on behalf of the OHR today. It is my special honour to introduce to you our guest from Sarajevo, Mr. Henning Philipp, OSCE Mission Spokesperson.

Henning Philipp – OSCE

Good morning everybody. As said by Avis, I am Henning Philipp. I am Deputy Spokesperson of the OSCE Mission to Bosnia and Herzegovina, and I am temporarily replacing Luka who is on leave this week.

One item for you today. The OSCE Chairman-in-office, Jaime Jose Matos da Gama, Foreign Minister of Portugal, concludes his visit to BiH today. This morning he is meeting with the political leadership of Republika Srpska. In the meetings he had so far he stressed the need for Bosnia and Herzegovina to focus its efforts as a state to become a successful part of Europe, in political, economical and cultural terms. The CiO noted that his impression from those talks was that the authorities were determined to head “forwards and upwards.” He said that “BiH should become a country that goes towards the future and remembers the past. The leaders realise the importance of BiH to move from being dependent on assistance to be a self-sustainable country.” In his dialogue with the Bosnian authorities, the Chairman-in-office focussed on the streamlining efforts, the strengthening of state institutions, the need for military reduction and sustainable return of refugees. Minister da Gama sees these as the key issues for BiH’s integration into Europe. He said “streamlining will lead to transfer of power and responsibility in this country from the international community to the citizens. Streamlining means” he continued, “that the international organisations will perform their tasks better and the people of this country will realise how the institutions work.” Regarding the OSCE’s future role in Bosnia and Herzegovina, minister da Gama mentioned security issues and institution building, including democratisation, human rights and the rule of law as the main tasks of OSCE in BIH. the CiO emphasized the importance of the regional co-operation to ensure stability in BiH as well as in the entire region. That was imperative in light of

constitutional amendments, refugee returns and security. And the final goute of the Minister: "I want to mention in particular downsizing of the armed forces which will enable them to modernise and by that increase the safety and security of the country. Downsizing, he continued, signifies the absence of threat and leads to stability of the whole region. I know it is difficult but I am very optimistic about the result." A related press release, which covers the whole visit of the CiO will be distributed to you later in the day.

Thank you.

Avis Benes –

Thank you Henning. Now, Kirsten of the UN.

Kirsten Haupt – UN

Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen. I have a rather large statement today.

I have not put it out yet but it will be available to you after the press conference so you do not need to be too hectic in writing it down.

As you probably all read yourself or wrote, the media reported extensively over the last couple of days, that Ante Kresic, a former Stolac police officer who has been indicted for war crimes, has surrendered to the cantonal court on 11 March 2002 and is currently detained in Mostar prison. A second person, who is covered under the same indictment, Petar Matic, has also turned himself in to the court on 11 March. A third person, Dragan Kresic, is still at large.

While justice appears to take its course in this case, UNMIBH remains greatly concerned over the appalling performance of the police in this particular case. UNMIBH has noted several serious violations and grave shortcomings in the Ministry of Interior of Herzegovina-Neretva Canton when dealing with this

case.

First, when following an order from the then Minister of Interior Dragan Mandic, Ante Kresic was removed from Stolac Police Administration, he was required to turn in his weapons, equipment and ID card in January 2001. He never appeared to have done so. UNMIBH will establish responsibility as to who in the Ministry should have ensured that this order of January 2001 was properly implemented.

Ante Kresic also appeared to have been a surplus officer and as such should have handed in weapon, uniform and ID card in August 2001 when, on an instruction of the IPTF Commissioner, all surplus officers should have followed these steps.

As you all know, the indictment against Ante Kresic and the other two individuals was raised in August 2001, and an arrest warrant was issued in September 2001. However, the police was unable to execute this arrest warrant and appeared not to have undertaken sufficient steps to locate Ante Kresic and arrest him. If the Ministry missed to suspend Kresic and implement the necessary steps in the first two instances, that I am talking about January and August 2001, then suspension should have automatically followed once Kresic was indicted for war crimes in September 2001. UNMIBH sees a conflict of interest in this regard that the police is supposed to execute an arrest warrant for someone who also continues to be their colleague.

Despite his removal order from January 2001, despite the indictment and the arrest warrant, and despite the fact that Ante Kresic had not been working since his removal from Stolac Police Administration in January 2001, he had remained on the payroll throughout this time and received full pay until at least December 2001. Following UNMIBH's intervention, Ante Kresic was finally suspended on the 4th of March 2002 with immediate effect. The failure to suspend Ante Kresic immediately after the indictment for war crimes was raised

against him constitutes a gross violation of Federal laws. Taking this case further, it is also a misuse of already scarce public funds to pay a person who doesn't do any work and should actually have been suspended.

UNMIBH has noticed continuing political interference in the work of the police as displayed by its abysmal failure to execute this and other arrest warrants and its failure to sanction Kresic once he was indicted for war crimes. This is of course of enormous concern to UNMIBH. UNMIBH will continue to investigate this case to ensure that this does not happen again and that those responsible officials are sanctioned.

So much about this case and now some information about the incidents that happened recently.

On the 8th of March 2002, local police in Mostar North station were informed about a case of desecration at a catholic cemetery in the village Donja Dreznica in the municipality Mostar North. Several crosses were overthrown, candle holders and vases broken, photos at one tombstone were damaged and one gravestone was overturned. Local police have launched an investigation into this incident and the Ministry of Interior issued a press release on the incident. UNMIBH strongly condemns this act of vandalism and hopes that it would not have an adverse effect on the return process in the area. As this is likely to be a return-related incident, UNMIBH expects the police to conduct a vigorous investigation in order to send a strong signal to those who keep trying to hamper the return process. It is good news, though, that despite this ugly incident the return of twenty Croats to their homes in a nearby settlement in Mostar North municipality on the 11th of March was successfully carried out. Increased patrolling by local police and SFOR during the coming days will ensure security for these twenty Croats in the initial phase of their return.

There has been another act of vandalism when during the night of 8/9 March five vehicles in the central zone were severely damaged. Two of these vehicles had foreign license plates, one from Croatia, the other one from France, two had BiH license plates while the fifth vehicle was a UN vehicle. Local police had responded swiftly to the scene of the crime and started an investigation. We strongly condemn these senseless acts of vandalism and want to repeat again that violence has never been the proper tool to solving any problems.

In this connection we need to call again on the media to adhere to the facts when reporting on such incidents. In this case, Dnevni List reported that several vehicles with Croatian license plates were demolished making it seem like an attack on Croatian citizens when it was in fact, as stated above, an attack on vehicles with BiH and foreign number plates including one UN car. It is imperative for the media to report accurately and without any distortion of facts. Misinformation is in contradiction to all rules of professional journalism and can only serve to create tensions.

The last item for today – UNMIBH also strongly condemns the attack on the house and business premises of the known businessman Dinko Slezak. A rocket was fired at his house already shortly after midnight on 28 February 2002 causing damage to the house and some vehicles. Crime police of the Herzegovina-Neretva Canton Ministry of Interior is investigating this case and we expect the police to conduct a professional investigation and to find the perpetrators of this attack.

Thank you.

Avis Benes:

The OHR joins the condemnations of these incidents. We know that you have a little time left and now I would like to give the floor to Major Lebrun.

Maj. Lebrun:

Good morning. I will try to be short because I know that there are many, many things that you have to do today. I have two statements, one about the demolition and cleaning on the stadium and second one about Harvest.

One month ago, I have informed you about the demolition of the building located in "Boulevard Narodne Revolucije" NR. 33 on Mostar's former confrontation line. This demolition began on the 18th of February and is now ended. The place is completely clean and MND SE Engineer Coy is involved in the removing of rubbles in the Stadium. On Monday 11th February 2002, this new operation has been conducted by MNDSE to support the Municipality.

Project Harvest has been conducted continuously since 1998 and large numbers of weapons, ammunition and other ordnance have been collected and disposed of. Nevertheless it is assessed that there is still a considerable amount of military weapons, ammunition and ordnance in private holdings. Project Harvest is a co-operative initiative by the Armed Forces of BiH, local authorities and police as well as IPTF and SFOR to remove illegally held weapons, munitions and warlike-materials from circulation. In the early weeks of April, Project Harvest operations will be again conducted throughout MND SE area of responsibility. Destruction of all collected items is the final aim of this project. SFOR MND SE in close co-ordination with IPTF will support local authorities and AF BiH in our area of responsibility. We will designate with them the locations and related time frames in which an intensive collection effort will be made. SFOR MND SE battle groups and IPTF will then be visibly present at the respective locations and SFOR MND SE will extensively inform the population on the circumstances. Local Armed Forces units will remain to be in charge of the transportation and destruction of the collected ammunition and weaponry, however, if requested, MND-SE Battle

Groups will provide them with some support. I only want to remember you that every weapon and round of ammunition collected and destroyed makes this country a safer place to live.

Thanks for your attention.

Avis Benes:

It is time for your questions. We will understand if some of you need to go. You also know that you can address questions to us always and not only at the press conferences.

Questions

Q: Pejo Gasparevic (HINA): I have a question for Mr. Philipp. It is noticeable that the European institutions are the only ones who increased diplomatic activities in regards to the forthcoming Constitutional changes. It is also noticeable that the Americans are keeping silence. My question is – do the European institutions have enough strength to remove conflicts in BIH?

A: Henning Philipp: So there is no sign that the American commitment to Bosnia and Herzegovina and to the whole of the Balkans is reduced. And it is surely a common commitment between the Europeans and the Americans to work for the benefit and stabilisation of this country. And let me remind you just of the military aspect of the whole thing that already now the bulk of the forces provided by the IC to the Balkans is provided by European countries. Just to take a military as the example. But the common commitment is also in effect in all civilian efforts to stabilise this country.