**STATEMENT BY CAROLINE ZIADEH**

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**SECURITY COUNCIL DEBATE ON UNMIK**

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**Madame President,**

**Distinguished members of the Security Council,**

**Excellencies,**

It is my honour and privilege to brief the Council on the latest developments in Kosovo. I note this is my second address this year, owing to the Extraordinary Session held on 8 February.

The Secretary-General’s report before you covers the main developments from 19 September through 15 March. Allow me, therefore, both to update you on significant developments since, and to offer my observations of the situation in the wider perspective.

I have held many consultations with political actors in Pristina and Belgrade, with religious leaders, civil society organizations, and with our main international partners on the ground. One of the key common observations is dissatisfaction with the level of progress being achieved through political dialogue, and the direct effects this has upon the security situation. The level of mistrust unfortunately remains high and must be addressed.

During recent months, tensions have simmered, with one major explanation being an inability to address long standing issues through adequate communication and dialogue, whether this be between Pristina and Belgrade, or between the Kosovo Serb communities and the Pristina central authority.

Over several months, sustained efforts have been focused on resolving the contested issue of local government legitimacy in the four municipalities, populated mainly by ethnic Serbs, in the northern part of Kosovo.

In December last year, Kosovo Serbs in Leposavić /Leposaviq, North Mitrovica, Zubin Potok and Zvečan/Zveçan, collected a sufficient number of signatures – well over the required 20 per cent of the registered electorate – to begin the process of recalling the mayors elected there in April 2023 by less than 4 percent of total registered voters, due to the Kosovo Serbs’ decision not to participate.

This process, long discussed in the framework of the EU-facilitated talks, has aimed toward reducing the tensions which inevitably resulted from these elections, including violent protests that centred around several municipal premises in northern Kosovo last May. Recently, representatives of the Kosovo Serb community in the north have claimed that the conditions set forth to recall the mayors do not allow for full representative participation in the recall vote. Subsequently, EU and ‘Quint’ country representatives based in Pristina have urged a reconsideration of this position, while Kosovo Serbs have responded that their arguments are legitimate, and being insufficiently accounted for. The recall process took place yesterday without any security incidents. However, only 253 out of 46,556 registered voters cast their votes. This unfortunately sets the stage for protracting and prolonging a fragile and unresolved issue.From our point of view, we will continue to support the EU-facilitated dialogue as the forum to find a consensual resolution on outstanding issues.

Madame President,

Over the past year, there have been numerous setbacks in efforts to build more confidence in peaceful relations among Kosovo’s ethnic communities through political dialogue. The Secretary-General in his report, and I in my briefings to the Council, have previously reported on a number of these setbacks, while wider international attention was drawn by the serious security incident which occurred in the village of Banjska/Banjskë last September.

I continue to stress the importance of accountability for that extremely serious incident through a thorough, fact-based investigation and assessment of its circumstances. This is both a judicial matter, and also a political necessity in order to avert any recurrence.

Across the same period, numerous developments have caused hardship and fuelled mistrust between the communities, developments which could and should have been foreseen and avoided by good faith dialogue. The Kosovo Serb community representatives have shared their feelings that they are faced with human rights challenges. These, as well as the frequent use of inflammatory and derogatory rhetoric, in both directions, demand closer attention and scrutiny, as well as responsible remedial action by those in leadership positions.

During a time when international political and financial investments continue to be made in support of good faith dialogue, *unilateral action* – particularly concerning matters that lie clearly within the scope of the dialogue process – cannot help to alleviate the concerns among ordinary people. The various agreements reached thus far through the dialogue process provide a clear roadmap toward the settling of many outstanding issues.

Regardless of which side undertakes unilateral actions, or the justifications provided for doing so, in the end, such actions only perpetuate an environment of insecurity and mistrust between the communities.

To build upon my remarks delivered here on 8 February,I must reiterate my continued concern, also expressed by several Member States, about the manner in which the new regulation on cash transactions was communicated and implemented, and how it has affected the more vulnerable segments of the non-majority communities.

Under the facilitation of the European Union, the parties have met five times, on 27 February, 19 March, 25 March, 4 and 18 April, to seek a solution that addresses the concerns raised and mitigate unintended consequences. We should remain hopeful that a solution can be reached, while urging the parties to work together to find practical solutions in the nearest future.

Another element of the main agreements, which can provide solutions for this and other outstanding normalisation matters, is the taking of earnest, credible steps toward establishing the Association/Community of Serb-majority municipalities.

Whatever the Community/Association’s final form, that form clearly will encompass the elements of sustainable financial and institutional guarantees for the Kosovo Serb community. This includes matters of local administration, along with essential basic services like education and healthcare. Repeated calls for its establishment should be heeded as it will serve as an important step towards fostering trust between the Serb community and central authorities.

Madame President,

The full implementation of the EU-facilitated agreements has become an ever more pressing priority, in order to help alleviate the continuing series of crises that have emerged in Kosovo. It is therefore of utmost importance for both sides to remain committed to constructive, good faith engagement and that they find practical compromises.

On matters where implementation of essential agreements *has* advanced, meaningful results have been accomplished during this same timeframe. These include advances on vehicle license plate validity, steps forward on the “energy roadmap,” and the facilitation of customs activities.

I wish to commend the Pristina leadership for taking action to fully implement the high court decision of 2016 affirming the property rights of the Visoki Dečani Monastery, which had previously languished for many years. Such action is to be welcomed, since it significantly contributes to both inter-community trust, as well as public confidence in the rule of law.

Madame President,

UNMIK will continue to make full use of its resources, in partnership with the UN Kosovo team and our many implementing partners, to help the communities to overcome existing mistrust, and to find opportunities for reaping the benefits of genuine cooperation. We will continue to support work across multiple fields that creates new space for communities to work jointly to positively influence processes that affect the future of all. This remains a central pillar of our mandated work.

The Mission has utilised its essential programmatic resources to facilitate innovation and collaboration to encourage greater mutual trust between the communities, find common ground, and establish more widespread tolerance of Kosovo’s diversity.

Madame President,

In this context, the Barabar Centre continues to carry out just such efforts at the grass roots level. Since my last report to you, the number of the Centre’s major activities has surpassed 70 over the course of less than one year, engaging with more than 4,000 individuals representing all communities in Kosovo.

To help inspire future champions of Trust Building in Kosovo, in November we conducted the second United Nations Kosovo Trust-building Forum, involving participants from all communities and professions, who agreed upon 27 Recommendations and many more related actions in six thematic areas: economic empowerment, environmental protection, language rights, media and misinformation, participation and inclusion, and strengthening the rule of law. More innovative initiatives lie ahead, in collaboration and with mutual support with our many international and local partners.

Madame President,

The promotion and protection of human rights is a fundamental part of UNMIK’s mandated work. Together with our partners, we continue to encourage the authorities to place Human Rights and Rule of Law principles at the heart of sound policy judgments. This applies to a wide range of human rights and freedoms, including rights to equality and non-discrimination, language, minority and property rights as well as freedoms of movement, expression, religion and assembly. The enjoyment of these rights and freedoms is indispensable to sustaining Kosovo’s multi-ethnic society.

Madame President,

On matters of transitional justice, and the right to truth, I welcome the resumption of meetings of the Working Group on Missing Persons, with the first meeting in three years having been successfully held on 31 January 2024. This direct engagement must continue.

During this period, UNMIK continued to extend its support to the Legal Aid Center and the Kosovo Law Institute, assisting hundreds of vulnerable individuals; conducted specialized training for young Kosovo Serb lawyers to enhance their work in pursuit of the rule of law; and sponsored law students at a legal clinic promoting multi-ethnic media work.

While progress has been made in the legal and policy frameworks to address gender-based violence, the need for enhanced cooperation remains, between governments, civil society and international organisations. The Mission will continue to employ proactive measures, strengthen support services, train professionals, raise awareness, and empower women and girls, towards full implementation of the comprehensive Women, Peace and Security agenda.

The Mission also continues to prioritize the Youth, Peace and Security agenda. In this regard, the 6th UN Youth Assembly in Kosovo this May will again serve as a platform to gather young activists and leaders from across communities in Kosovo and from around the region. The Assembly will support cross-community dialogue and entrepreneurship to help meet the challenges and opportunities of an AI-powered world.

Madame President,

Allow me to add a further point of critical emphasis. Namely, that to achieve progress in Kosovo, and fulfil our mandated goals effectively, the issues we and our partners tackle must be understood and treated as part of the wider regional context. We are aware that our work is part of a combined international effort to promote prosperity, stability and peace in Kosovo and beyond.

Madame President,

I wish to express my appreciation for the daily cooperation and support we receive from our major multilateral partners – in particular KFOR – and the strength of our coordination with the UN Kosovo team. Together, and with your continuing support, we will navigate this challenging period by maintaining foremost our focus on the rights and wellbeing of people. We will continue to call upon all leaders, political and civic, to meet their obligations in the same respect.

Similarly, we will continue to give our full support to prioritize dialogue over unilateral actions, or zero-sum divisive rhetoric. Acknowledging the trend of setbacks in overall trust, we will remain as determined partners to all who share the foresight for a better future. Good faith dialogue, communication and mutual understanding mark the path forward. Progress is born from actions undertaken with the willingness to forge compromises.

Madame President,

I conclude by extending my deep appreciation to you, distinguished members of the Council, for your support. Such support is indispensable to UNMIK’s continued endeavours to strengthen the conditions for a peaceful and normal life for all people in Kosovo, linked inextricably to peace in the region and beyond.

Thank you very much.