

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

**STATEMENT BY ZAHIR TANIN, SPECIAL
REPRESENTATIVE OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL AND
HEAD OF UNMIK**

SECURITY COUNCIL DEBATE ON UNMIK

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Mr. President,

Distinguished Members of the Security Council,

Allow me to start by expressing condolences to everyone in our Mission area whose lives have been so affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has been an unprecedented challenge for Kosovo and for the region, and a reminder that such challenges can only be resolved through regional cooperation.

Mr. President,

The human toll has continued to rise in Kosovo and throughout the region. In Kosovo, the public health authorities, in consultation with the World Health Organization and other international bodies, reacted swiftly to put in place measures to curtail the spread of the disease. These have included closing borders and boundaries, broad restrictions on movement, closure of schools and many private businesses, and the isolation of severely affected municipalities. Kosovo, with its smaller population and more limited

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resources, remains particularly vulnerable to the threat of a wider outbreak, or a significant increase in critical cases. Even as heroic efforts are being made by medical personnel, the health care resources of Kosovo are stretched thin.

Additionally, the immense economic and social burden of the health crisis on Kosovo's fragile economy is just beginning to be felt. This month, the International Monetary Fund has approved a \$56.5 million emergency loan to Kosovo, targeting the health care sector as well as other sectors affected by the crisis, while the European Union has just pledged some Euro 100 million in favourable loans to help stabilise the economy and overcome balance of payments difficulties. Some Member States have also begun to increase their direct support. Surely more will be needed, along with strong monitoring, transparency and accountability measures to ensure assistance reaches the people most in need.

Mr. President,

International cooperation has been galvanized on the ground. UNMIK and the United Nations Kosovo Team are cooperating closely with the local public health authorities, and with all our international partners. As you will expect, UNMIK is adapting its work, and we stand together with the people of Kosovo in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic. The Mission has revised its

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programmatic work for 2020. Among other adjustments, it has been providing direct support to municipalities and communities who are most vulnerable. Our online platforms and communications team have been cooperating with local media and partners to produce and disseminate health information, in partnership with the UN Kosovo team. I have personally been in contact with leaders in the region, including the Prime Minister of Albania, Mr. Rama, and the President of Serbia, Mr. Vučić, to solicit their help in promoting an inclusive and unified response. UNMIK and UN Women are ramping up ongoing support to shelters and other responses to domestic violence, with reported cases having risen by 36 per cent during March. We are closely monitoring the human rights implications arising from this pandemic, including the right to privacy. We have also taken all requisite measures to address the health and safety of Mission personnel, with, to date, no cases of the COVID-19 illness among Mission or any other UN staff in Kosovo.

Mr. President,

As experience shows everywhere, success in defeating the COVID-19 virus requires, at minimum, (i) a focused government, (ii) the mobilisation of people and resources, and (iii) strong leadership. It is an unfortunate feature of the present circumstances in Kosovo that political divisions have distracted the attention of many leaders away from the health crisis. These divisions have

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served to reduce public trust in political leadership during a time of heightened public anxiety and uncertainty. Since the close of the reporting period, the political landscape in Pristina is characterised by polarization among parties and competing claims to power between factions. This was manifested in sharp disagreements both within the governing coalition and between the Government and the President on a range of issues, from the response to the pandemic to lifting of the tariff on Serbian goods to the dialogue with Belgrade. The conflicting agendas culminated in a vote of no-confidence against the coalition government on 25 March, just as the COVID-19 crisis was striking. A caretaker government is in place, but as I speak to you today, the President has called for a new government to be formed by an alternative majority while the Prime Minister has called this action unlawful, vowing to challenge them in the Constitutional Court. Whatever next steps may ensue, it is clear at this stage that popular discontent has for weeks been palpable. It is essential that the political uncertainties not interfere with non-partisan action to fight the pandemic.

Mr. President,

This internal political instability may lead Kosovo to face additional challenges in joining with broader efforts to confront the crisis. However, I wish equally to highlight numerous examples of positive cross-community and cross-boundary coordination when it has most been needed. Health officials in

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Pristina, in northern Kosovo, and in Belgrade, have recently established improved communication and coordination, which was missing at the onset of this crisis. Essential items have moved more freely across the boundary, while the Serbian government recently donated a consignment of testing kits to Pristina's health authorities, regardless of a few public figures in Pristina choosing to react negatively along nationalist lines. The solidarity shown between leading medical professionals and officials, across ethnic and political divides, gives hope that cooperation can yet increase, as the rate of infections also continues to rise.

Mr. President,

The removal of the 100 per cent tariff on imports from Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina for an initial period, coupled with the introduction of "reciprocity measures" vis-à-vis Belgrade, was welcomed by some, though viewed as insufficient by others. Irrespective, this decision marked a step towards resuming more regular commercial relations, and a return toward the principles of the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA). It is also an important signpost toward a restart of the political dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. I note that the European Network of Transmission System Operators has voted to endorse an agreement with Kosovo operator KOSTT,

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an important achievement for advancing energy efficiency in the region and implementing the EU-facilitated energy agreement.

Although there is, as yet, no clear roadmap for continuing dialogue, there are at least signals that attention continues to be focused upon the issue, even as the COVID-19 emergency takes precedence. I welcome the appointment by the European Union of a dedicated Special Representative charged with advancing Belgrade-Pristina dialogue. Recent joint infrastructure and transportation initiatives, launched under the auspices of the United States Government's Special Presidential Envoy, marked another example of the practical engagement that is possible, when there is mutual political will and international support. Looking farther ahead, a coordinated international approach in support of the EU-facilitated dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade will be essential, and this remains our best hope for reaching a comprehensive agreement, and for sustaining peace.

Mr. President,

This crisis has tested the strengths and weaknesses of Member States and territories the world over. In closing, I wish to pay tribute to those leaders and professionals on both sides of the boundary who are supporting one another in fighting the pandemic. I urge political leaders to follow their example, and to focus on unifying their energy while putting personal and political agendas

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aside. UNMIK, the UN Kosovo team, and our partners will continue devoting our own collective resources and knowledge to help. I take the opportunity to call for further direct support to Kosovo to address its very urgent health and social welfare needs. As the Secretary-General has stressed, only through solidarity and unity of effort can we succeed in meeting and overcoming this enormous challenge.

I thank all Members of the Council for their continuing support of UNMIK.