

**SRSB CAROLINE ZIADEH STATEMENT TO THE
SECURITY COUNCIL DEBATE ON UNMIK**

New York

23 OCTOBER 2023

Mr. President,

Distinguished Members of the Security Council,

Excellencies,

Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am honored to update the Council on recent key developments in Kosovo. The Secretary-General's report before you covers the period from 19 March through 18 September. I will begin my statement today by bringing to your attention a serious security incident that took place on 24 September near the Banjska/Banjskë village of Zvečan/Zvečan Municipality in northern Kosovo.

Early in the morning that day, a Kosovo police officer was killed, and two others were injured at the entrance of the village, which had been blocked by two vehicles. Over the course of the day and into the evening, Kosovo police and heavily armed elements engaged in gunfire exchanges, resulting in four deaths and a number of arrests.

The Kosovo police seized a significant number of vehicles, military equipment, and weapons.

UNMIK joined the international community in unequivocally condemning the incident and the tragic loss of life, calling for restraint. It is essential that the investigations currently underway provide the opportunity to factually document these events and hold perpetrators accountable.

The major events on 24 September exacerbated an already deteriorating security environment, characterized by an atmosphere of mutual suspicion and contradictory perceptions touching much of the population, especially in northern Kosovo and among Kosovo-Serb communities elsewhere in Kosovo.

Mr. President,

In the days, weeks and even months leading up the 24 September, political and security tensions in northern Kosovo steadily rose in the absence of tangible progress in the EU-facilitated dialogue. The High-Level meeting held on 14 September in Brussels produced no consensus on the sequencing for the implementation of prior agreements. This was yet again an opportunity missed to engage constructively towards a programme for the implementation of the parties' respective commitments under the agreements made in Brussels and Ohrid earlier this year.

Both sides have exchanged inflammatory public allegations, damaging the fragile communication channels between the communities in Kosovo, and between political leaders in Belgrade and Pristina. During my interactions with a wide array of interlocutors -- including municipal, religious, civil society organizations and business leaders -- the most common sentiments I have encountered were frustration and concern caused by an uncertain future. Tensions and anxiety across Kosovo, reported particularly from members of Kosovo Serb communities, have been fueled by divisive political rhetoric. Rather than stoking tensions through political messages directed at one group, elected leaders bear responsibility for addressing the security needs and broader socio-economic concerns of all segments of society, regardless of ethnic, linguistic, or political background.

Mr. President,

Setbacks like the boycott by the Kosovo-Serbs of the 23 April local elections in northern Kosovo, where they constitute the majority of the population, ensuing questions of adequate political representation, and the terrible violence on 29 May that led to serious injuries of 93 KFOR personnel as well as civilians, represent grave dangers to achieving long term peace and stability. The current political impasse, with its impact on the security and well-being of the population, can

only be overcome through compromise that should be worked out in the Dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina.

De-escalatory measures are critical to reduce tensions, and in this regard, I share the hopes of many that the outcome of the EU and U.S.-led meetings held separately in Pristina and Belgrade on 21 October will place the dialogue back on a forward path, with firm commitment by both sides to implement de-escalatory measures and the proposals set forth during the meetings. This includes re-commitment by both parties to fully implement all previous dialogue agreements. Accordingly, work on the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb-majority municipalities should begin without delay or preconditions, alongside all other essential agreements.

We should keep in mind that failure of achieving political compromise will continue to adversely impact the well-being of ordinary people, including their ability to receive basic services and realize their socio-economic potential. In this regard, it is crucial to note that delays in the implementation of Dialogue agreements led to the postponement of an EU donor conference envisaged in the Implementation Annex of the February Agreement, which would have likely attracted substantial economic support and investment opportunities.

Mr. President,

We have often spoken during Council sessions about the positive ways in which sustainable political agreements impact people's lives, even when they come at a cost. Perhaps too rarely we talk about the even greater cost that accrues from not reaching agreements. Here I am speaking of the cost to all communities – be they Serbs, Albanians, or others residing in different parts of Kosovo and the entire region.

Tension, isolation, and growing lack of trust in political leaders to address peoples' most immediate interests and legitimate grievances witnessed these past months; and worse, the resort to violence and intimidation by those of ill-will; threaten the hard-won gains achieved through the EU-facilitated dialogue. Responsible leadership and compromise are required to return to a more productive political process.

We know the maxim that there is no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development. It is therefore worth stressing that regional cooperation and integration initiatives, in all forms, should be welcomed and prioritized in order to contribute to a more productive dialogue.

Peace, prosperity, progress, sustainability, and connectivity were some of the main themes highlighted during the General Assembly High-Level Week in September, and during the Berlin Process Summit held last week in Tirana. Today, in this august body, I believe that it is of the utmost importance that the international community

urges both Pristina and Belgrade to foster purposeful and concerted actions in line with these main priorities, including the observation that no single leader or actor can expect to go it alone in overcoming the present global challenges.

Mr. President,

I have already pointed out in my statement of April this year – and it should be repeated today – the need for clear and continuous communication with the public on issues affecting their livelihoods, health and human rights – issues such as land expropriation, and the freedom of movement of people and goods, including across the Administrative Boundary Line.

The work of rule of law institutions must be anchored in the human rights framework and should be clearly and publicly explained and communicated, to avoid misperceptions and ensure equality of all before the law.

I have welcomed the adoption of a law regulating the application process for the status of conflict-related sexual violence survivors by the Assembly of Kosovo and would encourage authorities to consider the recommendations of the UN Special Rapporteur on Truth, Justice, Reparation and Guarantees of Non-Recurrence in this regard. Following continued advocacy by UNMIK, UN agencies and civil society groups for the inclusion of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in the Constitution, we welcome the

Constitutional Court's decision of 1 August this year that paves the way for the inclusion of international human rights norms on the rights of persons with disabilities within the Kosovo legal framework.

Mr. President,

This year we mark the 5th anniversary of UNMIK's trust-building agenda. Despite a track record of success in strengthening dialogue, social cohesion, and resilience at the grass-roots level, the environment has become more challenging this past year. Nonetheless, we remain strongly committed to continue to work with our partners from all communities in Kosovo to foster communication and understanding among people. Doing so nurtures the ground for acceptance of the difficult but essential compromises necessary to achieve progress in the dialogue at the leadership level.

Six months ago, the "Barabar Centre" was launched with support from UNMIK and the Pristina Municipality. Used in both official languages in Kosovo, Albanian and Serbian, the word "Barabar" means equality and fairness. The Centre is a safe space in the heart of Pristina, where people from all walks of life and all communities, can meet to freely deliberate and transcend divisive political rhetoric. Since its opening in May this year, the Centre has organized more than 40 multi-ethnic events, demonstrating that even during challenging times it is possible – and indeed desirable – to bring people together.

To advance the Women, Peace and Security and Youth, Peace and Security agendas, the Mission continues to support women-led civil society organizations and encourage involvement of youth and women leaders in decision-making at all levels. We support initiatives aiming to promote active and meaningful participation of women in political processes and to integrate gender perspectives into the normalization process between Belgrade and Pristina. We will also continue to support young people, including through the annual UN Youth Assembly in Kosovo. The 5th Youth Assembly was held this June at the height of the political tensions. Still, more than 150 youth leaders from Kosovo and the region came together and constructively addressed critical issues, including: combating misinformation and hate speech; youth decision-making; and stopping domestic violence just to name a few. We thank the UN Kosovo Team for their close cooperation in this regard.

Together with our partners, the Mission ensures equal access to justice by improving courtroom infrastructure, providing free legal assistance and representation to more than 2,000 people from all communities throughout Kosovo, and offering interpretation services. We will continue to do so.

I wish to take this opportunity to commend the resilience of local actors, including UNMIK partners, committed women, men and young people from all Kosovo communities, who, despite divisive narratives and challenging realities, work tirelessly to bring more understanding between their communities.

Mr. President,

I would like to reiterate UNMIK's support for the EU-facilitated dialogue, with a sense of urgency, in light of the instability that has characterized the current reporting period. We are committed to supporting all voices rejecting zero-sum polarisation in favour of compromise and collaboration. We will continue our trust-building work, even though we often hear that "trust is at its lowest level" at this moment. But if not now, when?

Let me say this again: Dialogue is the only way forward.

Mr. President,

Before closing, I would like to take a moment to acknowledge the tremendous contributions of one of my key partners during a very challenging time in Kosovo, outgoing KFOR Commander Major General Angelo Michele Ristuccia of Italy. His leadership was instrumental during the management of several crises that erupted over the past year. I also extend a special welcome to his successor, Major General Özkan Ulutaş of Türkiye, with whom I know we will enjoy a similarly close working relationship in fulfillment of our common mandate.

I conclude by expressing my deep appreciation to you, distinguished members of the Council, for your support. This support is

indispensable to UNMIK's continued work to help ensure conditions for a peaceful and normal life for all people in Kosovo.

Thank you very much.