

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

**SECURITY COUNCIL DEBATE ON UNMIK**

**NEW YORK, 15 October 2021**

Mr. President,

Distinguished Members of the Security Council,

I am pleased to be with you today, and to brief you on essential developments in Kosovo since our last meeting in April.

Following the end of the official reporting period, detailed in the Secretary-General's report, we have experienced developments which remind us – beyond recent events in Kosovo – that lack of political understanding and communication is a vector for the escalation of tensions, especially in fragile security environments characterised by mistrust.

On the morning of 20 September, Pristina launched a police operation in northern Kosovo to enforce a new licence plate validity regime. Given the history of sensitive and long-standing discussions on Freedom of Movement, conducted over years

through the EU-facilitated dialogue, it would have been natural to expect early and clear communication with those affected. However, little or no such communication was attempted by the authorities. The international community on the ground, including KFOR with its responsibility for maintaining a safe and secure environment, was not given prior notification.

As a result, a stand-off developed as protesters in the north blockaded traffic at the northern gates along the Administrative Boundary Line. Special Units of the Kosovo Police, armed with long weapons, deployed to the northern crossing points in armoured vehicles. These units in one instance utilised tear gas and percussion grenades in an attempt to disperse the protesters. Over the ensuing several days, the numbers of both protesters and Special Police Units increased. On 26 September, an as-yet-unexplained fire was set at the vehicle registration centre in Zubin Potok, while overnight on 25 September an undetonated ordnance was discovered in another public office in the north. For its part, the Serbian Army deployed a platoon-strength reaction force in the vicinity, north of the Administrative Boundary Line, and conducted several military overflights in the same area.

Mr. President,

International officials such as myself, with long experience on the ground, could hardly be surprised by the reaction to this strong-armed effort to implement a change of policy, given the history of mistrust and the sensitivity of community relations in the north. The fact that this effort was not discussed through established channels – in the first place, the EU-facilitated dialogue on freedom of movement – resulted in an avoidable yet potentially dangerous escalation of tensions, lasting for ten days. Through the good offices of European Union High Representative Borrell, supported also by United States diplomacy, an agreement was achieved to de-escalate this hazardous situation. It provided for the withdrawal of Kosovo Special Police Units from the north, and an increased KFOR presence to establish a safe and secure environment. An interim solution was agreed on licence plate validity, with discussions to continue during the following six months.

What we witnessed in the north could be called a bruising episode, but it could far too easily have been turned into a real haemorrhage. The volatility of the situation can also be understood by the direct personal interventions with the Pristina and Belgrade leaders by NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg and President of the

European Commission von der Leyen, among others. While closely monitoring the situation, my Mission also played a tempering role on the ground, making use of our experienced presence in the north, in order to encourage calm and reduce the likelihood of an accidental or uncontrolled confrontation between special police and the public. I also raised my voice against unilateral actions, calling for responsible leadership and for the taking of immediate steps to reduce tensions and continue political dialogue.

Then, just this past Wednesday, Kosovo Police Special Units were once again deployed into the north, as part of what has been described as an anti-smuggling operation, conducted in several locations in Kosovo. It is questionable whether KFOR was properly informed in advance of the deployment of Special Police Units. Over the course of the day, this operation provoked further protests and clashes that resulted in a significant number of injuries, among protesters, police and uninvolved civilians, including in one case, a life-threatening wound caused by police gunfire, in circumstances still to be clarified. Civilians in North Mitrovica reported injuries in their homes from tear gas and percussion grenades, which were in use by police over several hours. Protestors threw stones and, according to the Kosovo police, some suspects used firearms to engage the police. As EU High Representative Borrell observed afterward, “unilateral and uncoordinated actions

that endanger stability are unacceptable [...] issues must be addressed through the EU-facilitated Dialogue.” Accounting for context and exercising responsible forethought are essential to avoid unintended consequences and strategically risky escalation. The latest actions deepened the mistrust felt among the Serb population in the north, and led to strong reactions in Belgrade, making a responsible recommitment to dialogue all the more imperative now.

Mr. President,

I have spoken in detail about the events of 20-30 September and other issues with both Prime Minister Kurti and President Vučić. I have also been engaged in conversations with the diplomatic actors involved, especially those representing the United States, the Russian Federation and China, as well as the KFOR Commander and EU officials. There are several important lessons – or perhaps better, reminders – that emerge when it comes to Belgrade-Pristina relations, regional stability, and the indispensability of the dialogue process.

Dialogue can and should be the mechanism used to avoid the dangers which are less often visible, but just as real as they have been during these past twenty years.

History in the region has tragically and repeatedly shown that ostensibly small incidents, misreading of intentions, and outright mistakes can trigger an unstable security escalation that puts lives at risk and benefits no-one.

Mr. President,

International actors, including ourselves and the members of this Council, welcomed the recent encounter between President Vučić and Prime Minister Kurti on 6 October during the EU-Western Balkans Summit, in the presence of French President Macron and German Chancellor Merkel. Still, it would be premature and overly optimistic to say that we can see a resumption of real commitment to the dialogue, which remains the only forum in which responsible and result-oriented discussions can continue.

I raised the importance of continuity in the dialogue with both President Vučić and Prime Minister Kurti during my talks with them. This is a daunting challenge as well for the EU institutions, who are charged to lead this process in a meaningful way. What I noticed and heard in my meetings with representatives of the international powers represented in this Council, is that despite the other differences, they do

clearly share an understanding that there is no reasonable alternative to sustained engagement in dialogue. This is a minimum, to help avert the retrograde potential exhibited these past weeks. It is important, further, to support all initiatives that may help to promote responsible relations among all the neighbours in the Western Balkans.

From my point of view, trust continues to be the element in shortest supply: Trust in good faith negotiations; trust between representatives and their constituencies; and trust in the institutions that are established to deliver both.

Observing the many cycles of this dialogue over more than six years, my personal conviction remains strong, that if the vast majority of people from the various communities, including women and young people, do not feel themselves to be a part of, or to have a stake in, the processes of political discussion and negotiation, if there is no mobilisation of the society, and if they are not – at the very least – aware of what is even being discussed, then all efforts to change relations, and resolve long-term tensions, are destined to remain elusive. A facilitated agreement on paper is a vital objective. *But having a paper in hand does not equate to having a solution in hand.* Those who could exert more influence on negotiating parties to succeed are mostly worn out by tired arguments and nationalist political

sloganeering. This is true in Kosovo, it is true in Serbia, and it is true across the entire region.

Mr. President,

As Kosovo is approaching another local election in two days' time, the focus at central and municipal levels should now be trained upon delivering the high expectations of people for change. Why was turnout so high in the past general election? In fact, what the people called for is more responsive and responsible government, including tangible follow-through on the reform agenda promised during the campaign period. Even more, voters clearly want public institutions to work in favour of the welfare of people, in contrast to the past. They want greater equality of economic and social opportunity, fairness, accountability, and reliable recourse to the rule of law.

Accordingly, Prime Minister Kurti, who on at least two occasions has shared with me the major priorities of his government, assured me of his focus on this reform agenda, calling it his top priority. I urge the government today publicly, as I have

done privately, to focus on rebuilding the bonds of trust so long broken between all the communities in Kosovo and the political leadership.

Rebuilding trust demands a sincere approach to the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue process, as well as building an encouraging atmosphere among the different communities within Kosovo. Dealing maturely and responsibly with the past is a precondition for stability, which includes avoiding the instrumentalisation of divisive ethno-nationalist themes for political advantage.

I have had many conversations with regional leaders during the past year, including with President Vučić and Prime Minister Rama of Albania, and I want to stress that practical regional approaches have begun to evolve, utilising the commonality of interest in increased prosperity as an engine to effect a more stable region. Like the Berlin Process, upon which it was partly modelled, the Open Balkans Initiative, promoted by President Vučić, Prime Minister Rama, and Prime Minister Zaev of North Macedonia, is in my view a promising step exactly in this direction, despite differences over its details and form.

Mr. President,

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to present an unprecedented challenge to Kosovo and the region. Curtailing its spread, and mitigating its socio-economic consequences, is another matter that behoves cooperation across borders, boundaries and ethnicity.

The United Nations, through COVAX donations, has helped Kosovo's vaccination programme, and UNMIK and the UNKT have been working closely with authorities to encourage and promote acceptance of vaccinations and preventive measures. I am proud that UNMIK and the UN Kosovo Team contributed to increasing the COVID-19 testing and vaccination capacity in Kosovo, provided humanitarian assistance and equipment to the most vulnerable, and have focused as well on objectively monitoring human rights protections in relation to the pandemic. With strong support from Headquarters, we successfully completed a vaccination campaign for all United Nations staff and dependents, international and local, not only UNMIK but also all other UN entities on the ground.

Mr. President,

In accordance with our mandate, the Mission continues widely to engage on the ground, across multiple sectors and areas of work, anchored by an agenda dedicated to promoting and supporting Trust Building among Kosovo's diverse communities.

I have spoken already of trust as a major preoccupation of my time and vision for our Mission, a strategy which we have forged and refined through experience. Such work is indispensable, and must continue, for the reasons I stressed earlier. We have used the important instrument of our programmatic funds to set the tone and to seed the realisation of nearly all the objectives laid forth in the UN Trust Building Forum I hosted in 2018, through combined efforts of UNMIK, the UNKT, and our many international partners working hand-in-hand with members of different communities who believe in a peaceful future together. From our work promoting the Women and Youth, Peace and Security Agendas; to supporting multi-lingual education; to funding and co-sponsoring debate on television and new media platforms; to proving legal assistance and education for access to justice; we have helped to model the people-centred approach and society-level engagement articulated by the Secretary-General's reform programme and the Common

Agenda. This is the catalytic role to which our Mission remains dedicated: engaging with and empowering voices for change, while applying our creativity, understanding and analysis of the real circumstances to promote long-term and sustainable benefits for all. In my view, such work is the bedrock of a sustainable agreement, without which the vicious cycles of public mistrust and the use of divisive rhetoric for short-term political gain, will simply repeat themselves. The events of the past weeks, with their propensity to unravel the steady but fragile progress made in rebuilding trust among communities, are of deep concern to me and should be a warning to all members of this Council.

Mr. President,

I thank the members of the Council most sincerely for their attention, and for their continuing support throughout all these years, of myself and of UNMIK.

Thank you.