

Statement by the OSCE Head of Mission, Ambassador Jean-Claude Schlumberger, following violent incidents in northern Kosovo which affected local elections on 3 November 2013

(Check against delivery.)

Thank you for coming at such a late hour, I would say “good evening” but that would not be true.

Today the OSCE was involved with the last stage of the facilitation of the first round of local election in the four northern municipalities, i.e. the voting itself.

As we have reported throughout the morning, all the polling stations had opened more or less on time, with the exception of one that opened at 9:30 hrs in Mitrovica north for purely technical reasons.

The voting was going on and the electoral process was successful across northern Kosovo up to 17:00 hrs when the polling stations and our staff came under an attack in three polling centers in Mitrovica North.

When I say it was a success I can confirm that everything was peaceful in Zubin Potok for example when I visited the polling station in the primary school Jovan Cvijic and talked to the members of the four polling station committees there and congratulated them on their excellent performance.

Furthermore, according to our facilitators the turnout at 17:00 hrs in the three northern municipalities was as follows:

Leposavic: 22 percent

Zubin Potok: 22 percent

Zvecan: 11.21 percent

Indications that the elections would be a success were obviously not acceptable news for everybody.

At 17:00 hrs a group of masked men began an offensive against the electoral process.

They first stormed 16 polling stations in Sveti Sava primary school in Mitrovica North. They trashed ballot boxes and destroyed other election materials; they assaulted our staff and threw tear gas. Similar scenarios happened in the Technical and the Medical schools in Mitrovica north.

At that point we were forced to pull our staff out of Mitrovica north. We were later informed that an explosive device was found in the Technical school as well.

The situation started deteriorating in Zvecan as well where our staff also came under attack, one of our vehicles is parked just outside – it should give you an impression of what our staff went through.

Concerned with a spillover of violence we requested from the CEC to authorize us to close polling stations in the other three municipalities by 18:30 hrs and to secure election materials.

I want to make it clear that the OSCE never requested cancellation of the elections as wrongly reported.

The CEC responded to us with a request to take custody of the materials and return them to the CEC.

I can confirm that we are now in custody of the election materials from the three northern municipalities and that they are being transported to the CEC's Counts and Results Centre.

Finally I would like to thank security providers for their support.

Thank you for your attention. I will now take your questions.

Note to media: The OSCE is facilitating local elections in the four northern Kosovo municipalities in line with the 19 April EU-facilitated Belgrade-Prishtinë/Priština agreement.