



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to Recent Events in Northern Kosovo

As delivered by Charge d'Affaires Gary Robbins
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
September 15, 2011

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

The United States welcomes the EU and NATO coordinated plan to reintroduce normal customs controls at Kosovo's northern border crossing points with Serbia, which have remained interrupted since the attacks on the gates in early 2008. We strongly welcome steps being taken to restore a fully functioning customs regime throughout Kosovo under Kosovo law, which should be the goal of the international community and all member states here today.

Let us be clear, Kosovo is a sovereign country and even those participating States which have yet to recognize Kosovo's independence must acknowledge that Kosovo is a separate and single customs territory under UNSCR 1244, recognized as such by the EU as well. The presence of Kosovo customs officers at the gates is fully in accordance with international law. Planning for these arrangements was carried out in full coordination with the international missions, EULEX and KFOR, which are acting completely in accord with their mandates. The reopening of the crossings and implementation of the customs stamp agreement reached through the EU-facilitated dialogue on September 2 is also being done in full coordination with the international community. It is misleading to assert that any steps being taken are "unilateral" in nature, or to draw false comparisons to the events of July 25. Kosovo customs officers will be present at the gates alongside EULEX, just as they were present alongside UNMIK in 2008 at the gates before they were burned.

The free movement of people and goods is in Kosovo's and Serbia's interests – and in keeping with each country's EU aspirations. The arrangements offer strong opportunities to both sides to benefit from two-way trade, which was interrupted by Serbia in 2008, and to combat smuggling across the border. It is in everyone's interest to see the development of transparent, professional and effective border control mechanisms.

The United States has serious concerns about the inflammatory rhetoric coming from certain participating States, which could potentially incite violence in Kosovo, putting at risk civilians and international personnel on the ground. This is unacceptable. In this context, we underscore again the need to bring to justice those responsible for the killing of the Kosovo police officer in July and the arson attack at the border gate. The Permanent Council must be clear that threats of violence are counter-productive to peace and stability in the region. Again, we urge restraint and caution on the part of all parties and encourage all actors to use their influence to foster calm on the ground. The United States greatly appreciates the work of the EU, KFOR and OMIK. We call on all member states to support the work of these missions in Kosovo as they exercise their responsibilities.

We also encourage the Governments of Serbia and Kosovo to focus on utilizing the EU-facilitated dialogue to resolve issues of practical concern that impact the lives of people in the region, and to strive to continue building on the notable progress achieved in the dialogue to date.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.