

*Press Club 10 September 2002*



*BG Lute: Opening Statement, Press Club*  
09/10/02

Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for coming today.

As we continue down the road towards Kosovo's future, we see many positive signs in our sector. KPS is becoming an active, productive institution. Some people are making the individual decision to return to their homes. Upcoming elections will allow people to choose their local leaders. Thousands of school busses, shopping busses and private autos are moving throughout our sector without incident. Violent incidents continue to be the exception rather than the rule.

And yet, I see other signs as well, signs that indicate there are still those who don't share in a vision of a peaceful Kosovo. We know about Klokot. A grenade was recently thrown into a citizen's yard in Cernica. Individuals still maintain illegal weapons caches that my soldiers discover. Some individuals still talk of not supporting the returns of their neighbors to their pre-war homes. There was a grenade attack in Vitina this last weekend.

These competing signs – positive and negative -- reflect the Kosovo of today. The vast majority of citizens want to continue down the path of progress to a better future, but there are still a few who remain tied to the ways of the past. KFOR's purpose in this sector, as always, remains to work with those citizens who want peace, together with the police, the duly elected civilian leadership and our partners in the international community to ensure that the few who don't share our vision do not dictate the future. If we all work together as a team, I am confident we can accomplish this goal.

America and my soldiers remain committed to all the people of Kosovo and the peace we have established together. We will continue to uphold our responsibilities as members of this team we have formed. As another sign of this continued commitment, exercise Dynamic Response will begin shortly. We will base part of the U.S. 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit here on Bondsteel while the majority will live and patrol in the German sector to the west. Dynamic Response is an exercise designed to demonstrate NATO's ability to deploy its strategic reserve. In all, six nations will contribute soldiers to this exercise demonstrating the U.S. and NATO's continued commitment to peace in the Balkans.

Tomorrow is September 11th. Memories of that tragic day are still fresh. But the sense of loss and grief of one year ago have been replaced by a worldwide resolve to defeat terrorism. Fellow soldiers in Afghanistan carry on that fight today, just as we continue our peacekeeping mission in Kosovo. When the history of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the war on terrorism is written, I believe we will prove again what the people of the Balkans already know so well: violence and hatred only chain us to the past and do not provide a path to the future.

Last time we started on this side, today we will start on this side (points to other side of room).

(Questions Begin)

1) Shaban Buza, Reuters: What was the impact of September 11<sup>th</sup> in your sector?

BG Lute: Most of the soldiers who are here today were not here a year ago on September 11<sup>th</sup>. Most of the American soldiers here in Kosovo today, were at their home bases in Germany. Personally, I was not assigned to this division, but still had an office in the Pentagon. In Germany obviously it had a dramatic impact because we raised our protection levels of all of installations. With our partners and our host German comrades and we have taken a deliberate and persistent attempt to protect our soldiers and their families. Here in Kosovo there were not substantive changes after 9-11 because we were already at a well-protected posture. That sort of protection level is very typical when American forces deploy away from their home bases. And always you know as personal experience that sort of protection level continues to this day.

2) Shyqeri Halabuku Radio Zeri (Pozheran) –I would like to ask you why we don't have positive results in getting in criminals in Kosovo?

BG Lute: I agree that the rule of law and order is not what we want it to be here in Kosovo. No one should be satisfied yet. On the other hand, only three years after the war there is substantial evidence of progress. I'm sure many of you were here three years ago. And in the summer of 1999, Kosovo was largely in chaos. Violent crimes, bombings, murders were a common occurrence in this sector. And today while this is not a perfect society it is not 1999. I think there are three key factors for that progress. First – Kosovo police service has stood up and begun to have an effect on law and order here in Kosovo.

The KPS is not perfect, but it has shown a lot of progress in three years. The second factor is that the majority, the citizens of Kosovo, want a different future. The majority of citizens want law and order. And the third factor is the international partnership between UNMIK, KPS, and KFOR. The combination of these three factors that together that team can move towards a better future. Thank you.

3) Selim Sylejmani, TV Liria – How far has the Joint Task Force come in the Klokot investigation?

BG Lute: As sometimes investigations go, progress is slow but steady. Many interviews have been conducted and searches have taken place. I think you're all aware of the telephone hotline that is available and the reward that has been offered for assistance. We have received calls anonymously on the hotline. Which signals to me that there are concerned citizens in this area who also want to find the answer to Klokot. Our coordination with the KPS and the CivPol has been excellent. We are in contact on a daily basis to exchange information. At this stage in the investigation, some five weeks into the investigation, we are satisfied with the progress. These things take time, and we must show patience. Thank you.

4) Milazim Thaci, Radio Furtuna – Do you have an evidence of Al Queda here in Kosovo and do you have any leads?

BG Lute: As you can imagine we take very seriously any indicators of terrorism where American troops are deployed. We are very alert to any threat. Today, I know of no evidence that constitutes a threat to U.S. troops in Kosovo, either by Al Queda or any known terrorist organization.

5) Agim Kajitzi, Radio Gjilan – You caught some arms at the border of Macedonia. Do you have information about the people or anything in this direction?

BG Lute: A couple of weeks ago, we found a large cache of ammunition along the border with FYROM. For example in this cache there were more than 900 hand grenades. The condition of these weapons that they had been in the ground for some time ... perhaps a year. But I can assure that even after that period of time, these ammunitions remain very dangerous. We believe that they were remnants of the conflict last year. We have no evidence that they were involved with anything here in Kosovo.

6) Selim Sylejmani, TV Vali – in the cities of Kosovo will be one minute of silence and this is not enough. Of course, this is devoted to the victims of September 11<sup>th</sup>, how do you think the Kosovars can be engaged against terrorism, as Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld said there is room for everybody?

BG Lute: In my view, the single most important contribution that people of Kosovo can do is support law and order. This means that together we have to figure out what happened at Klokot. It means that the people of this area have to show no tolerance for the small grenade attacks that have happened over the last several weeks. It means that all

of the people of Kosovo have to have a sense of tolerance for one another and show dignity and respect for one another. Kosovo is at a crossroads. One path leads to the past. This is a past where law and order are not important and terrorists might conclude that they can work here safely. The other path is a path to a more safe and secure future. A future where is treated with dignity and respect and everyone is subject to the rule of law. My mission is to provide the people of Kosovo security as to move down that path to the future. But KFOR can only secure the path; the people must walk the path.

7) Besim Idrizi, RTV Festina: Today the elections campaign started, and what is KFOR's position on this?

BG Lute: Today begins the six weeks of active campaigning here in Kosovo. As you know, these elections will be administered by OSCE and local officials. During the election period, my mission remains unchanged. In concert with our partners, the KPS and the CivPol, we will provide security for the area. I mentioned in my previous answer, Kosovo must chose to walk down a path to a new future. These elections are a milestone along that pathway. It's a milestone that the international community will watch to see Kosovo's progress. I encourage you all as responsible members of the media, to encourage your listeners, readers, and viewers to get out and vote. Thank you.

8) Selvete Berisha, Radio Premeira – Mr. Lute how to do assess the situation in Kamenica?

BG Lute: I believe that the international team in Kamenica has shown good progress in the last three to six months. The UNMIK, KPA, CIVPOL and KFOR team have shown the ability to work together for the betterment of the community. I site two examples. First Kamenica is one of the municipalities in this area that now has mixed ethnicity KPS patrols. This is certainly an important sign of progress. The second example I site is in the last several months there have been several large public events in the city of Kamenica and they've been held peacefully. I think this shows the teamwork within the international but also of perhaps the tolerance of the Kamenica community. I certainly encourage the citizens of Kamenica to continue along this path. Thank you.

9) Jelena Popovice, TV Herc – Today as we are sitting here right now it seems impossible, but my question is this: after the elections do you think it's possible that the refugees can come back and live here?

BG Lute: We've seen some slow steady progress returns refugees and IDP's this summer. The numbers are still small and I don't think anyone should be satisfied that we had great progress so far. But I would also site some good signs of progress. In several areas this summer small groups have returned to an area where they are the minority in that area. While sometimes greeted with reluctance or suspicion, these returnees, families, have been accepted back into their pre-war homes. We've taken two initiatives recently to brighten the future for returnees. Several weeks ago in this room we brought together municipality leaders from Urosevac/Ferizaj and Strpce to discuss about their mutual issues of returns. We are trying to get municipal leaders to talk to each other about

mutual returns that effect their municipalities. The second initiative is that we've done the same, which is created opportunities for discussion with our region and the Prizren region. Our hope is to bring together municipalities and regions so that together we can offer a better opportunity for all the citizens of Kosovo. But government officials are only part of this solution. The real key is successful returns in large numbers lays with the neighborhoods and local residents who are willing to demonstrate tolerance for people who are somewhat different. Neighbors must understand that the future is getting along with one another and not the conflict that has riddled the past. Thank you.

10) Albana Isufi, RTV 21 – Last week you had caught some people taking pictures of the camp. Do you have any information that those individuals were from terrorist's organizations? How safe are soldiers here?

BG Lute: You're right – over the last several weeks we have detained several individuals who we believe we're trying to photograph our facilities. We take security very seriously; we assume these people were not tourists. In every case, we've acted exactly the same. These people are immediately detained and held here at Camp Bondsteel in my detention facility. An investigation is launched to search their vehicles and residences. They are released only when we are confident that they intended no harm to KFOR. So don't take pictures of KFOR facilities – please! Except the one picture we take at the beginning of the press conference.

11) Perparim Isufi, Zeri Newspaper – Mr. General can you be more concrete -- is the incident in Klokot an ethnic problem?

BG Lute: Whenever we begin an investigation of something like Klokot, we begin by considering at all possibilities. In this early stage of this investigation, we are looking at the possibility that Klokot was caused by an ethnic dispute. But there are other theories that exist that do not include an ethnic dispute, so it's too soon to tell. And we should not rush to conclusions.

12) Xheladin Rexhipi, TV Liria, Mr. General, the last three years of war, in the village of Strpce we don't have any Albanians that return to their homes ... (local village named). The people that already returned want to leave, they can't rebuild their homes. It's impossible to live there. And there is no chance for their kids to attend school.

BG Lute: You're right, we've had some good progress in returns to the Strpce area. I believe in every case these returns were by individual choice to return to their homes. The problem that you suggest, of course, goes to the tough question of making a return sustainable. KFOR's role in making a return sustainable has to do with making a secure environment. Of course we work closely with our international partner of UNMIK and UNHCR to meet the needs of the returning citizens. We will continue to do so. Thank you.

13) Visar Hoti, Radio Tema – 5 citizens of the Algerian country were arrested on suspicion a terrorists acts and can you make comment on the soldiers on the bridge in Mitrovica?

BG Lute: I will not you are very clever you are trying to get two questions out of one. You have a choice – which one do you want me to answer .. the first one. Rules--

KFOR has detained a number of Algerian citizens of the last couple of weeks. There were two groups detained. The first group my soldiers detained because they were observing and photographing a KFOR facility. While we investigated that, the individuals had the opportunity to live at Camp Bondsteel for a while. The second set was detained outside of my area by other KFOR troops. That investigation is still ongoing by KFOR. These individuals will be held until we're comfortable that they meant no harm to KFOR. Thank you.

You can see Major Ballesteros for question number two or maybe someone else wants to ask me about Mitrovica.

14) Bekim Kupina, Koha Ditore – Tomorrow there will be a homage to the victims of September. In Ferizaj, Serbs will attend. Is it symbolic and how safe is this?

BG Lute: Well first I want to express my appreciation on the behalf of all the Americans here in Kosovo for all the expressions of support that began a year ago and continue till this day. There were casualties from 60 countries as a result of Sept 11<sup>th</sup> last year. So while the attacks took place in America, they were not really attacks on America but on all of civilized humanity. We Americans appreciate the citizens of Kosovo remembering with us those attacks. Now as you mentioned it is also a coincidence tomorrow Sept 11<sup>th</sup> is a religious holiday for the Serb Orthodox religion. And also mentioned there will be a mass held in the Serb church in Urosevac/Ferizaj tomorrow morning. This has nothing to do with the attacks on Sept 11<sup>th</sup>, but is a long-standing holiday. We certainly expect no problems in the midst of this religious holiday. Thank you.

15) Besim Abazi, Voice of America – Do you expect changes if there is terrorism here in Kosovo?

BG Lute: Before September 11<sup>th</sup> last year, America had worldwide commitments. Now with a global war on terrorism those commitments are growing. While my soldiers peacekeeping mission here in Kosovo continues, we have fellow American soldiers who are in combat right now. From what I read, from my national leaders, we can expect that the war on terrorism will last some years. Let me reassure you and the other citizens of Kosovo, that America is strong enough to maintain its commitments around the world while we conduct the global war on terrorism. America keeps its promises and my soldiers in this sector are part of that promise.

One last question before lunch.

16) Driton Ramadani, RTK – We talked enough about September 11<sup>th</sup>. How safe are the soldiers here in Kosovo?

BG Lute: I have two important obligations here as commander here of U.S. forces. My first obligation to accomplish my mission, which is to provide the people of Kosovo an opportunity for the future. As you know we take that very seriously. Just as important and taken just as seriously, is our obligation to take care of our soldiers. While we carefully watch the situation around us every day today I assess the situation as safe and secure for my soldiers. This is reflected by the recent decision to come out of helmets and protective vests. It is that most certain sign of progress that Americans are without their helmets on patrol. Let me assure you that because we take security seriously, our helmets aren't far away.

Thank you for coming today. I hope you enjoy the lunch that Major Ballesteros has provided. I hope I see all of you and even more next month.