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Morning Briefings

NATO HQ

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By Jamie Shea

Jamie Shea: Ladies and gentlemen. Good morning. I am sorry to be a little bit later today, but there are a number of things I had to look into before coming down. However, I believe that you received much earlier the detailed list of the activities of yesterday. Something to sort of keep you going in the meantime. So, good morning and welcome.

As you know last Thursday, the world gave its opinion, gave voice, through the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, condemning the crimes against humanity committed by Slobodan Milosevic and his regime. All of us in NATO are convinced that those crimes are an assault on the values that NATO was born to defend 50 years ago, and these are the values which NATO is defending in Kosovo today and the reason of course why NATO is acting. Every leader of the Alliance shares that conviction, and later today President Clinton is going to give a major speech at the Arlington National Cemetery, on the occasion of the US Memorial Day holiday, and he will be stressing very strongly the moral basis of NATO's actions. He will make it clear that our commitment is to freedom, to the rule of law and to fundamental human rights, and he will reiterate the determination of every Ally to press on until those values are upheld and we achieve our objectives.

Now, yesterday was one of the most intensive 24 hours in the operation thus far. NATO forces flew 772 missions, 323 of those were specific strike sorties, and another 92 were missions to suppress the Yugoslav integrated air defence system. NATO aircraft attacked the full spectrum of the military capabilities of Belgrade, on the ground in Kosovo, first and foremost, and there the targets included 12 tanks, 7 artillery positions, 6 armoured personnel carriers, 2 mortar positions, a radar site, troop positions and other revetted positions of military vehicles. And then, once again, a wide spectrum of strategic targets elsewhere in Yugoslavia, and you have the details - an extensive list - that we passed round this morning.

As always, I am very pleased to be able to say that all NATO aircraft returned safely. Today is Day 69 of Operation Allied Force and the operation continues.

Tomorrow, you will recall, we have the Force Generation Conference at SHAPE. We also have tomorrow afternoon the visit of the Prime Minister of Slovenia, and the Secretary General and the Prime Minister will give a short press conference at the main entrance at just after 5.00 p.m. tomorrow afternoon, for your information. And I will keep you updated regarding further events this week at NATO as they are

organised. So now, I will take your questions.

Julie: Jamie, can you give us any update on where the request by France and Germany stands to hold a G8 meeting in response to Belgrade's alleged acceptance of the G8 plan?

Jamie Shea: I have been looking into this, Julie, that is one of the reasons why I was late today, because I was looking into a number of different things, but there is no information yet as to when and where that meeting of the G8 will be held. I think from what I understand, the initial idea is to have a meeting at the level of Political Directors. But, as you know, tomorrow there is once again the tripartite meeting of President Ahtisaari, Mr Chernomyrdin and Strobe Talbott, and I think to some degree the timing of the G8 meeting probably is linked to that meeting tomorrow of those three individuals, and as soon as I have something I will let you know.

Jake Lynch, Sky News: On the two attacks, Jamie. First of all, anything to add to the overnight statement about the attack on the bridge at Vavarin? Secondly, the other thing was anything on the reports of the attack which allegedly struck a hospital in Surdulica?

Jamie Shea: First of all on the bridge incident. You saw the statement that we put out, I think just before 10.00 p.m. yesterday evening - at least that's when I received it - and it is clear that NATO aircraft did attack that bridge yesterday. I don't have any details about casualties. We've seen the Serb reports, but I can't obviously confirm any of those. And again, I want to stress to all of you that that bridge is - was - a legitimate, designated military target.

On Surdulica, I've been reviewing that this morning with the military commanders. We struck last night at a military barracks in Surdulica. Again, I want to stress that this was a designated, legitimate military target. The information I have so far is that that military target was hit accurately. If I have more, Jake, I will give it to you later on.

Greg: There is also a report about a market in Krusevac being hit.

Jamie Shea: No, Greg, I haven't seen anything today on the market in Krusevac.

Margaret: Can you just give us an idea about the timing of the Force Generation? Is it something that is going to last for a couple of days or can you give us any more details on that?

Jamie Shea: It depends, Margaret, very much on how far we get tomorrow. I mean if all the nations come along and say to SACEUR "yes, yes, you want this, you've got it" then it can all be over and done with in the space of one day. But if it is a question of shortages, particularly for example engineering units, which are critical in this mission because of the reconstruction, the de-mining work, then we might have to have a follow-up Force Generation Conference, or a so called Force Balancing Conference, to identify those extra assets. So it depends very much on how far we get tomorrow.

Spanish National Radio: There has been a report in the Spanish Journal,

El Mundo, about some report on NATO telling that NATO is losing the information war. Do you know anything about that?

Jamie Shea: No. I have seen the article of course. I do not know on what it is based, which is surprising because of course I am very much involved in this operation, but as far as I am concerned, NATO is waging the information campaign, we will continue to do so, and I can assure you that we do not perceive that we are losing it, but we are definitely waging it and we will continue to do so.

Now what do I mean by that? I mean by that simply that we will continue to stand up here for as long as this operation lasts giving you the honest, straight facts about what we are doing and why we are doing it. That's our policy and we are going to continue it. I don't see this as a propaganda battle, I see this as simply NATO being open, accessible, transparent and putting it's case to public opinion.

Question: Can you tell me when or where was this report generated?

Jamie Shea: No, I genuinely can't because that report is something which I am unaware of, and I think if this was a report that had any weight, if this was a report that had any authority, then I, as the spokesman of NATO, would be aware of it and I am not aware of it.

Hugh: Jamie, about the bridge attack. I mean I can see of course why you regard bridges as legitimate targets, but my question is cannot something be done to make it less likely that bridges, hitting bridges, will cause civilian targets, i.e. hitting them at a different time of day and not the middle of the day when it is more likely there will be civilian people using them?

Jamie Shea: Well, Hugh, you know that NATO pilots do take every precaution to avoid inflicting damage to civilians and, as I said, when I was at Aviano at the weekend, really what impressed me was the enormous lengths that they go to to analyse the target in advance, to select exactly the right ordnance that they need to strike the target accurately with the minimum amount of environmental or, what would I call it, sort of surrounding damage so that it's all done very, very accurately, the angle, the timing and everything. I mean this really is a science. It goes on, as I say, for 24 hours round the clock with the intelligence pooling, the identification of the targets and then the pilots, as I said, spend four hours being briefed before they take off to make sure that they have every conceivable piece of information that they need to do proper identification. And so I can assure you that never before in human history have so many people made such an enormous effort to minimise the risks of damage and harm to civilians. Compared with conflicts in history, this is an exponential progress. I can assure you.

Now having said that we have, as you know, Hugh, aborted an enormous number of missions when bombs could have been dropped, because pilots perceived that there was a risk of harm to civilians. General Jertz has told you yesterday of bombs being redirected into a river because suddenly, at the last moment, the pilot had a little degree of uncertainty about the possibility of harm to civilians. So we really do take every conceivable precaution to avoid this.

Question: Just as a follow up, I am not an expert in military matters, but would for example, if this had been a clear day, would a pilot have been able to see what he was hitting, I mean with his eyes, or does he fire off from so far away that he couldn't see?

Jamie Shea: No, it's not a question I can assure you of altitude. I know that there's a sort of an impression that has gone around that we are too far up. This is not true. In fact one of the things that I learned in Aviano, which I didn't know because I am not a military man either, is that target identification is easier at altitude than it is very low down, believe it or not, and accuracy is easier at altitude than if you were going at tree-top level. So no, there is no correlation between the height factor and any inaccuracy. Far from it. Again the pilots make every conceivable precaution to make sure they hit.

And by the way, this bridge, let me just make this clear, was hit accurately. We are not talking about a missile that went astray here. We've had the missiles hit exactly where they were intended to hit so the pilots did their work as they should have done. But I do not know every circumstance of this particular incident.

Hugh: In general terms, what are operational rules? Is a pilot told that if he can see that there are civilians on the bridge, that he is to abort it?

Jamie Shea: Pilots, as I said Hugh, pilots know that if they see a risk of harm to civilians, then they don't strike at the target. And we have got a good record, as I say, of aborting missions, of putting bombs somewhere else if there is that sense that there could be harm to civilians.

But again, we cannot eliminate this altogether but NATO does not intentionally target civilians, never has done, isn't doing it, never will do it. And again those efforts that we make to avoid inflicting harm to civilians are in marked contrast to Belgrade which has been intentionally targeting civilians and that's the whole reason why we have got ourselves involved in this business in the first place. And again that is a fundamental difference which I will continue to stress, and stress, and stress.

Question: You've been stressing in the last couple of days the moral basis for the NATO campaign which most people, I suppose, in this room would grant, but if you are stepping up your bombing campaign and you are targeting built up areas for a lot of reasons, among them the reason that Serbs move their troops and their armour and artillery there. Is it not something that gives you qualms that even though you may not be trying to cause casualties, civilian casualties, intentionally that they are going to be inevitable? As it was explained to me by a NATO official today, at the point of impact, no matter how smart the bomb is, it cannot discriminate between a civilian and a soldier. No matter how much care you've taken, once the bomb arrives, whoever is there is in great jeopardy.

Jamie Shea: Well what does that say about a government that then puts its military into civilian areas and exposes its population to greater risk as a result? Obviously that is something that Belgrade is responsible for, clearly. But it is not going to deter us from carrying on with this air campaign, because every day while we operate we get reports of more

suffering, more violence on the ground in Kosovo.

Again yesterday, over 100 people from that prison entered Albania and you saw, once again, the appalling physical condition they're in. We had 750 refugees entering Macedonia. We have to think about the 550,000 internally displaced people in Kosovo who are in an enormously difficult situation at the moment. And we have to think about those one million deported people who are living in difficult conditions, in refugee camps, in the surrounding areas. We have to think about all of those people who are still being held captive inside Kosovo as well. And that is where the moral basis comes from.

As I have said before, nobody can accuse NATO of resorting to force rapidly, we tried to solve this for 12 months on the basis of negotiation, on the basis of trying to find a political solution but President Milosevic insisted in Kosovo on a military solution and therefore we have to use force in order to rectify that humanitarian suffering. If there were another way of achieving that objective, I can absolutely assure you that NATO would have chosen that other way. But there wasn't but the responsibility is firmly with Milosevic. He is the person who wanted the use of force to be the decisive factor and therefore NATO has had to make the use of force our decisive factor too.

So, thank you very much indeed, ladies and gentlemen. I will see you at 3.00 p.m. with General Jertz.

