

OHR RRTF Report July 1997 - Annex 7a

RRTF: Report July 1997

Annex 7a

UNHCR's "Open Cities" Initiative
Current Status

15 July 1997

Since its launch in March 1997, UNHCR's Open Cities Initiative has been warmly welcomed by the international community and some governmental and municipal authorities. However, mere declaration of willingness to accept minority returns does not automatically lead to Open City status. Recognition of an Open City is a process during which UNHCR and its international partners must first assess and evaluate the genuine commitment of potential candidates based on clear and common criteria. Three Open Cities have been recognised and UNHCR and its partners are currently assessing the potential of several other municipalities to become Open Cities including the list of twenty-five municipalities¹ presented to UNHCR on 16 May by the Federation Minister for Social Affairs, Displaced Persons and Refugees and Kresevo municipality proposed by Joint Presidency Member Kresimir Zubak on 10 July 1997. This report provides a summary of those cities that have been recognised as "open" as well as those that are currently being evaluated or show some potential² for recognition as Open Cities.

RECOGNISED OPEN CITIES

After joint discussions between UNHCR, IPTF, SFOR, OSCE, ECMM, the US Embassy's Population, Refugee and Migration Office (PRM) and the local authorities, Konjic municipality (Neretva Canton) was recognised as an Open City on 1 July 1997. The municipal authorities have signed a Letter of Intent with PRM in order to receive funds under its Open Cities Support programme. These funds will originally be spent, mostly through Catholic Relief Services (CRS), on the reconstruction of 60 houses (half for Croats/ half for Bosniaks), a primary school and a Social Services Centre in the village of Bijela. De-mining is an essential part of the project and after completing its survey, the Mine Action Centre will carry out de-mining activities. IMG and ECHO will repair the electric infrastructure and UNHCR will provide the returnees with a package of non-food items to facilitate their reinstatement. An additional list of 160 Croat families has been given to the municipality to assess the feasibility of their return.

On 5 June 1997, Busovaca municipality (a split Bosniak/Croat municipality in Central Bosnia Canton) unilaterally declared itself an Open City. Again, after discussion and evaluation by UNHCR and other international organisations working in the area, PRM and the local authorities, Busovaca was recognised as an Open City on 2 July 1997. The municipal authorities signed a Letter of Intent with PRM and CRS on the same day making Busovaca eligible to receive special assistance under the US Open Cities Support programme. Busovaca's plan would initially enable over 4 000 displaced minority members to return. To date, 41 Bosniak families have returned and about the same number of Croats, with the help of Caritas, are about to do so.

UNHCR is continuing to liaise closely with PRM and CRS to implement the Open City project in Vogosca municipality³, recognised as "open" on 3 July 1997. It is the first area in the Sarajevo Canton to be chosen for such a project and to sign a Letter of Intent with PRM to receive assistance. UNHCR has already identified a group of individuals who have confirmed their desire for immediate return. The project will be implemented in stages so that UNHCR can monitor its success and decide whether or not to continue with or delay a second phase. UNHCR will, in close liaison with the community, draw up social and economic programmes targeting both the receiving communities and the returning minorities, and is encouraging NGOs to do so as well. In addition, OSCE and OHR are providing input, by identifying difficulties encountered with the municipalities, such as harassment of minorities or electoral engineering. The general plan is to start with small steps, and progress in stages into other areas, modifying the plans as necessary. Hopefully, Vogosca will set an example for other communities in Sarajevo to

follow.

POTENTIAL OPEN CITIES

FEDERATION

CENTRAL BOSNIA CANTON

In addition to Busovaca, other cities in Central Bosnia are slowly starting to express their interest in the Open City concept, although somewhat hesitantly. UNHCR is currently assessing which of those have a genuine will to support minority returns and is advising them on what steps they need to take to meet the Open City criteria and qualify for support.

Unfortunately, despite the genuine will demonstrated by Gornji Vakuf to qualify for the Open City programme, the process has recently been hampered by the Croat self-declared municipality (Uskoplje) which has refused to reunify with the Bosniak part of the town. This continued split municipality status disqualifies the whole city from being recognised as an Open City. However, this is not stopping the Joint Commission from continuing to meet to assess individual families' willingness to return and to identify those houses to which their return would be feasible.

GORAZDE CANTON

The Gorazde Cantonal President, Hamid Prses, has publicly stated that Gorazde Canton will welcome back all its former residents, irrespective of their ethnicity. In April 1997, he wrote a letter, on his own initiative, inviting "all persons" to return to Gorazde (the population of which is now predominantly Bosniak). He stated to UNHCR that he will support the return of former Bosnian Serb residents and will assist in finding a solution for those whose houses are occupied. He also visited the surrounding Republika Srpska communities, both with UNHCR and on his own, to encourage displaced persons to return to Gorazde Canton, and has made public statements on Gorazde TV and radio to encourage the population to co-operate in the return of former Serb residents. Following these initiatives by the President, UNHCR has decided to develop a return project for Bosnian Serbs and is currently identifying a community which will assist both the returning Serb and displaced Bosniak communities. The Cantonal authorities have agreed to co-operate fully and have stated that they will assist in relocating persons now occupying the houses of potential Bosnian Serb returnees. Several potential villages have been identified and UNHCR is discussing return with their former Bosnian Serb residents.

One possible limiting factor in the nomination of Gorazde as an Open City is that relatively few Bosnian Serb displaced persons have been identified who have expressed a desire to return to Gorazde. However, given the public statements and actions taken by the President and the potential for improved relations in the area if some return does take place, UNHCR has decided that Gorazde should be supported with a project to assist reintegration efforts in the community.

NERETVA CANTON

Although Prozor municipality is not currently directly seeking support as an Open City, it has also committed itself to the return of minorities and started to "open" two villages, Duge and Hudutsko. 26 Bosniak families have already returned to Duge, and the local authorities are in the process of identifying Bosnian Croat families willing to return to Hudutsko. Some of these families are reluctant to return for various reasons including the high level of damage.

SARAJEVO CANTON

The Sarajevo Canton itself has been proposed by the Federation Ministry of Social Affairs, Displaced Persons and Refugees as an Open City. Recognising that not all municipalities within the Canton – or even communes within the municipalities – are equally open, UNHCR is currently closely reviewing possibilities within the Canton to determine what other municipalities or communes have the potential to be chosen as Open Cities.

TOMISLAVGRAD CANTON

There have been some indications that Glamoc municipality may be willing to become an Open City. Glamoc (previously 80% Bosnian Serb and now almost 100% Bosnian Croat) has already received some 500 spontaneous returnees of Bosniak and Serb ethnicity.

TUZLA-PODRINJE CANTON

In each of the seven municipalities in Tuzla-Podrinje Canton nominated by the Federation Ministry, the local authorities expressed genuine willingness and a strong commitment towards reintegration and minority return. However, they argued that the practical implementation of minority return projects would lead to an increase in tension and possible security problems among the displaced population currently residing in Bosnian Serb properties who fear further displacement as a consequence of minority returns. Taking all the factors blocking minority returns into consideration, it appears that Bosniak-administered Lukavac municipality has the best potential to become an Open City. The authorities are considering facilitating the return of displaced Bosnian Serbs to the village of Panjik and its surroundings. UNHCR has proposed an “area” approach, which serves both local and returnee communities. Bosnian Serbs intending to return are preparing a list of families and return locations for the Lukavac authorities’ approval.

UNA SANA CANTON

One of the most promising municipalities in the Una Sana Canton is Bosanski Petrovac municipality. Bosnian Serbs made up 75% of the municipality’s pre-war population which is now almost 100% Bosniak. The current Bosnian Serb population comprises twenty-five persons, towards whom the municipal authorities have shown a consistently positive attitude. The international community considers Bosanski Petrovac a pro-minority-return area and sees the current population as having the potential for acceptance and reconciliation. The following villages have been suggested as probable return areas: Bjelaj, Bravski Vaganac, Bunara, Rasinovac and Bukovaca. On 9 July, UNHCR, OHR, OSCE, IPTF, SFOR, and ECMM “toured” the municipality with the local authorities to explore the possibilities for creating conditions for return. After this very successful tour, which focused on the villages of Bukovaca, Bjelaj and Rasinovac, the international community promised to support the municipality in its efforts to accept minority returns.

In addition, discussions are under way regarding the potential acceptance of the IEHL-divided municipality Ključ/Ribnik as an Open City.

REPUBLIKA SRPSKA

SIPOVO

Sipovo municipality is still under active consideration as a potential Open City. Discussions with the RS authorities are ongoing in order to remove blocks to any further development.

RIBNIK

See Una Sana, Ključ/Ribnik.

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Office of the High Representative Reconstruction and Return Task Force