

BiH Institutions Assume Responsibility for Return Process

The OHR's Reconstruction and Return Task Force will close on the last day of 2003, when the relevant BiH institutions will formally assume responsibility for the return process. Property Law implementation is nearing completion, almost one million people have returned to their homes, and the BiH institutions have expressed a clear desire to take the lead in maintaining and then completing the return process. As part of the ongoing process of handing back responsibility for key state functions to BiH institutions, the International Community will primarily assist and monitor the newly empowered domestic authorities with Annexe-Seven implementation as of next year.

"Full responsibility for human rights and for refugee return is being formally returned to the BiH authorities, because they now have the tools that they need to complete the work of refugee return and to uphold the human rights of BiH citizens," the High Representative, Paddy Ashdown, said. "This handover is crucial because the responsibilities being handed over are so important, and because it is part of the process of domestic institutions taking full responsibility for the governance of BiH."

It should be emphasized that Annexe Seven implementation is not complete. Large numbers of homes have still to be rebuilt and there remain many citizens who wish to move back to their pre-war places of origin but have not yet done so.

The BiH Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees (MHRR) opened its first regional centre in Sarajevo on 22 December 2003. Centres will be established throughout the country to maintain

and facilitate the return process. The launch of the regional centres marks the start of an implementation program that will set in place a comprehensive nationwide structure through which the MHRR can discharge its responsibilities effectively. An important practical boost to this programme has been BiH's recent acceptance as a member of the Council of Europe Development Bank, which will make it possible for BiH to receive soft loans for return and reconstruction projects.

"Despite the progress that has been, and is being, made – there are still major challenges for the years to come," the High Representative said. "Those who have returned face the challenge of reintegrating in their community, and, even more importantly, they and their neighbours face the common challenge of overcoming difficult economic conditions. This process of sustainable return must be addressed in the context of the overall process of economic and other reforms already underway in BiH."

There is no definitive data on how many registered returnees have chosen to remain in their pre-war communities but as many as 2-300,000 may still wish to return. They will be helped by BiH institutions, who will implement reconstruction and return projects, with continued assistance from the International Community. The aim of BiH's strategy is to complete the return of displaced persons and refugees by 2006.