

Remarks by Principal Deputy HR Donald Hays At the formal inauguration of Regional Centers of the BiH MHRR

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The International Community has been engaged in the returns process for eight years and is now transferring responsibility into the hands of the BiH authorities.

Setting up the regional centres in Banja Luka, Sarajevo, Tuzla and Mostar, to coordinate return efforts in the field and monitor reconstruction carried out by the MHRR with the support of the Return Fund, establishes a nationwide mechanism with which to maintain the momentum of return.

Let's be clear. This is not the end of international engagement here. This work will not be completed until every displaced person or refugee who wants to return to their prewar home has had an opportunity to do so.

We have to recognize the reality both in the field and politically: the return of a million people to their homes in the years since the war – with a huge upsurge in numbers during the last three years – is an astonishing achievement. But it is not enough – all of us should resist any temptation to conclude that it *is* enough.

When even one family is prevented from going home, BiH is prevented from becoming a normal country. This is, candidly, why the International Community has to stay here – it's not just because of economics but also because of the rule of law.

The work that has been done since the war to overhaul the

judicial system and retrain the police forces has gone a long way towards making respect for human rights the norm in BiH – but it hasn't gone all the way. So let no one be in any doubt – this work remains a priority, for the International Community and for the BiH authorities.

When *your* human rights are infringed, *my* human rights are infringed. When *one* citizen's human rights are violated, *all* our human rights are violated.

The launch of the regional centres marks the start of an implementation programme that will set in place a comprehensive nationwide structure through which the MHRR can discharge its responsibilities effectively. Other major components in the Law of the amendments to the Law on Refugees from BiH and Displaced Persons in BiH, which went into force in November, are the setting up of the Return Fund and the reform of the State Commission for Refugees.

I am pleased to note that Entities and Brcko will allocate a part of their reconstruction funds to the Return Fund.

The objective of OHRs Reconstruction and Return Task Force have been largely met, in terms of the substantial completion of all property claims. Consequently, OHR will by the end of this year withdraw from its active work in the return sector. UNHCR and other IC organizations will, however, continue their Annex VII related activities. In addition, the European Commission, the Swedish International Development Agency and the Dutch Government have confirmed that they will continue their bilateral support for return and reconstruction and for the MHRR.

In this respect, the 18 December announcement that BiH has been accepted as a member of the Council of Europe Development Bank is an important step, since this will make it possible for BiH to receive soft loans for return and reconstruction projects.

I am pleased to note that a standard set of criteria will soon be adopted and established throughout BiH by which beneficiaries for these loans will be selected, based on the aspirations, needs and particular vulnerabilities of potential returnees. It is important that the process of selecting and initiating projects under this scheme start without delay, so as to catch the reconstruction season.

Allow me to express our particular thanks to the Swedish International Development Agency, which is the main donor of the "Establishment of the Regional Center Project", and the Dutch Embassy, which is also a contributor.

Thank you.