

# High Representative Supports Human Rights NGOs

The High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, met today in Sarajevo with human rights non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from across Bosnia and Herzegovina to discuss the need for improved respect for human rights.

NGO representatives noted that the lack of equal access to housing, employment and education is a real impediment to the return of refugees and displaced persons. Representatives underlined to the High Representative that not all discrimination occurred along ethnic lines; women, children, elderly, disabled and residents of remote areas suffer disproportionately. Several NGOs specifically mentioned the danger faced by journalists and the need for greater guarantees for press freedom.

The High Representative encouraged NGOs to assume their responsibility in building the future of Bosnia and Herzegovina. He indicated that the OHR supports the adoption of NGO legislation, in line with Council of Europe standards, which will protect NGOs' freedom of action.

Ambassador Petritsch emphasized the role of civil society in forming government policy and advised using the media to influence public opinion. He "The International Community is committed to Bosnia and Herzegovina becoming a peaceful, multiethnic and stable society", he said. "But we cannot do this alone. This country belongs to its citizens who must be our partners in achieving our shared goal of peace implementation."

The participants agreed to work more closely together in the future and to keep the High Representative informed about their efforts, as well as the obstacles they face in their work to protect human rights.

NGOs present were the Citizens' Alternative Parliament (Tuzla), the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Sarajevo), the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Republika Srpska (Bijeljina), the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly (Banja Luka), Cupido (Mostar), Forma F (Posusje), Zene Zenama (Sarajevo), Democratic Circle (Bihac), Center for Civic Cooperation (Livno), and the Democratic Initiative of Sarajevo Serbs (Sarajevo).