

## **Ambassador Schumacher On Returns to Central Bosnia**

Senior Deputy High Representative Hanns Schumacher notes with satisfaction the recent smooth return of Bosniak families to the village of Gacice near Vitez and expects that this process will, as agreed, continue after the elections.

Ambassador Schumacher emphasizes that Bosnian Croat refugees and displaced people enjoy the same right to return. This right is guaranteed to all citizens of Bosnia and Herzegovina under Annex 7 of the Dayton Peace Agreement, and the international community fully supports this provision.

In reiterating this commitment, Ambassador Schumacher expresses his concern about the assertions made by the newspaper "Slobodna BiH" on September 9. He feels that the article in question distorts factual evidence with the apparent goal to spread fear and confusion among Bosnian Croats to prevent them from returning to Central Bosnia.

While it is true that more Bosniaks than Bosnian Croats have returned to the municipalities of Travnik and Novi Travnik, it is not true that Croat returnees have been deprived of political and material assistance from international organizations. In the villages of Turbe and Bulici, for example, to which 166 Bosnian Croat families returned, 150 of their houses have been rebuilt with international funds. Also, contrary to the claim made in the mentioned article that funding for Bosnian Croat houses has been withdrawn in Sebesic, UMCOR are, at this very moment, rebuilding Bosnian Croat houses there, while ECHO has pledged further assistance. Another example: the European Union alone is currently financing the reconstruction of 660 houses in Central Bosnia, out of which 490 belong to Bosnian Croats.

Regarding security for Bosnian Croat returnees to the area, Ambassador Schumacher is extremely concerned about the eight murder cases in Travnik. He has repeatedly called on the local police authorities and IPTF to do their utmost to resolve the cases and find the perpetrators. At the moment, the investigations are still ongoing, so there is no evidence that the murders are related to return. The Deputy High Representative feels that claims suggesting such a linkage are ill-intentioned as they only spread fear among potential returnees. The international community has worked hard and remains committed to creating a safe environment, of which the Joint Police is an indispensable part.

The above facts show that where Bosnian Croats return, they receive international political support and material assistance. In that context, Ambassador Schumacher would like to convey his impression that Bosnian Croat leaders often bring up unfounded reasons to prevent returns, which lead the Ambassador to believe that they do not really want their people to return. It was in that sense that he told two Bosnian Croat officials that Croats apparently expect return to be "served on a silver plate", providing the returnees with completely rebuilt and refurbished homes, jobs and individual protection. Ideally, this should be the case, but it is not within the power of the international community to create such conditions on its own. For that, the international community needs the cooperation of local authorities and unbiased press reports, which inform of the conditions to return in an objective manner.

The Ambassador hopes that the leaders that will be voted into power in this weekend's elections will be aware of their obligation to cooperate with the international community and help their refugees and displaced people to return. The international community, on its part, is planning various projects and initiatives to support returns after the elections. For example, both in the Central Bosnia and the Neretva-Herzegovina Cantons, return conferences will be held so that local authorities, party leaders and NGOs take stock and discuss concrete return projects.