

Visit by Croatian Serb Refugees from the Banja Luka Region to Vojnic/Croatia

The Office of the High Representative was involved in providing IC support to a visit by Croatian Serb refugees from the Banja Luka region to Vojnic/Croatia.

In spite of arrangements with the head of the ODPR (the Croatian refugee authority) in Zagreb, Mr. Pekovic, contacts with Foreign Minister Granic and the mayor of Vojnic being present in order to welcome the bus with visiting refugees, the Croatian police undermined this effort that was directed at reconciliation and the exercise of the right to return.

The border police held up the visitors, which were accompanied by the RS Deputy Minister for Refugees, for five hours, issuing them with entry documents ("border pass") for only one day (on forms normally allowing visits up to 3 months) after long negotiations.

The local police and special police in Vojnic kept so close a watch on the bus that they prevented the passengers to alight to visit their mostly elderly relatives waiting on the streets. This can only be understood as deliberate action to frustrate an otherwise successful visit.

The OHR strongly condemns this irresponsible behaviour of the police force that stands in contrast with assurances given by ODPR on the safe conduct of the prepared and announced visit. The OHR requests that the Croatian authorities investigate the conduct of the police, and identify those responsible for giving the order for this police action. Croatia as a regional guarantor of the Peace Agreement was again called upon by the Contact Group on 25 March to fully implement its obligations and cooperate with the International Community. It is

essential that Serb refugees from Croatia, currently in the Banja Luka region, can exercise their right to return. It is also essential that they have the liberty to visit their homes, as well as have property and other documentation issued to them without hindrance. Croatia has failed on this score. This is in violation of its obligations both towards its own citizens as well as the Peace Agreement. OHR will inform the Steering Board and Contact Group members, and the EU Ambassadors, about this serious incident.

Sarajevo, 26 March 1998