

## **Memorandum of Understanding on Common Strategy for Fire-fighting signed in Mostar**

Witnessed by the Deputy High Representative, Ambassador Colin Munro and representatives of BiH Council of Ministers, BiH Federation and RS ministries, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Regional Fire-Fighting Strategy was signed today in Mostar between representatives of SFOR, Dubrovnik county from Croatia, municipalities of Ravno and Trebinje from BiH and Herceg-Novi from FRY.

In recent summers fires have devastated vast forest and other areas on the Dalmatian coast, in Montenegro and BiH causing significant damage. Fires do not respect boundaries: most of the fires on the Dalmatian and Montenegrin coast as well as in Trebinje and Ravno Municipality cross international borders supported by strong winds. In order to effectively fight this natural disaster, stronger regional cooperation has to be developed for the benefit of all parties.

Following initial conversations between the High Representative, Ambassador Wolfgang Petritsch and Prefect Ivan [prlje in Dubrovnik, Head of the regional OHR and DHR Ambassador Colin Munro invited interested parties to work out the parameters of cooperation on fire-fighting. The product is the Memorandum of Understanding which solves practical problems such as deployment of fire fighting aircraft, access to airspace and cross border fire fighting coordination.

Since land based fire-services are not able to fight against fires efficiently because of problems with mine contamination and the lack of suitable roads in the area, aircraft are the most efficient means of fire fighting. They are available, based in Croatia. Under the conditions of this agreement, SFOR will provide them with rapid permission to enter BiH air space requesting just a minimum of administrative procedure in order to react as quickly as possible, before fires get out of control.

Moreover, a common Fire-fighting Coordination Centre (FFCC) will be established in Croatia. This center will in future coordinate all fire-fighting activities among regions and be in permanent contact with relevant sources of early warning in order to collect information on new fires as soon as possible. The Centre will also request the permissions for "take off" of FF -planes from SFOR air-traffic control center and if necessary will request also support of fire brigades of the neighboring regions Trebinje, Herceg-Novi and Ravno. Trebinje, Herceg-Novi and Ravno on the other hand will also have the right to request the support of Dubrovnik fire brigades in the case of emergency.

For the future, the MoU emphasises the need for all regions to modernize their equipment. All parties agreed to work out a common project proposal to be presented to the Stability Pact.

The OHR strongly supports this MoU and believes that it represents an important step toward greater regional cooperation. It should lead to significantly increased effectiveness of fire-fighting in the region for the benefit of all citizens. The OHR congratulates all participants for their constructive involvement in reaching agreement on this Memorandum of Understanding.