Ambassadors' Tour of Return Areas

Ambassadors from more than 20 countries assisting the Return process today participated in a helicopter tour of key return sites across Bosnia and Herzegovina. The ambassadors traveled at the invitation of High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch, COMSFOR General Michael L. Dodson and UNHCR Chief of Mission Werner Blatter through a cooperative effort of the multi-agency Reconstruction and Return Task Force.

High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch led a delegation visiting the villages of Gornje Kolibe in Srpski/Bosanski Brod and Janja near Bijeljina. UNHCR Deputy Chief of Mission Udo Janz led a delegation visiting Halapic in Glamoc Municipality and Podgremec in Bosasnka Krupa Municipality. DCOMSFOR Major General Francois de Goesbriand led a delegation visiting Crnca in Visegrad Municipality and Mostar. Senior representatives of the State Ministry for Human Rights and Refugees, along with Federation Minister for Displaced Persons and Refugees Sefer Halilovic and RS Minister for Displaced Persons and Refugees Mico Micic accompanied the delegations.

The ambassadors had an opportunity to witness at first hand the progress and challenges of reconstchallenges of reconstruction and return in these areas. They spoke to individuals who have returned to their prewar homes, and they were briefed by local politicians and administrative officials as well as by staff of implementing agencies involved in the return process.

The ambassadorsą visit was designed to highlight successes and to illustrate the four key strategic issues for refugee return targeted by the RRTF – property implementation, support for spontaneous returns, cross-border returns and sustainability

issues; all of which merit the additional attention of international donors and the responsible ministries.

In addition to the need for housing and infrastructure repair, returning refugees and displaced persons continue to face difficulties ranging from access to employment, health care and other social benefits; and, in some instances, harassment. The International Community is determined to ensure that obstacles to the return process are removed and encourages both the domestic authorities and the donors to increase their engagement on these issues.

The return process is working. In 2000, more than 67,000 people went back to their homes in areas where they are a minority – almost double the rate in 1999.

In the first quarter of this year the number of minority returns almost doubled, compared to the same period last year. In the first quartst quarter, 22,300 people went back to their prewar homes in areas where they are now the minority, bringing the total number of minority returns to more than 217,000. Many of these people have returned to areas where the worst excesses of ethnic cleansing were committed during the 92-95 war.

If the present rate is sustained, the return process could be all but complete within two years. This would represent a major breakthrough in the implementation of Annex 7, and the implementation of the General Framework Agreement for Peace as a whole. The return of citizens to their prewar homes is a core element of the postwar settlement, and one of the pillars on which a normal society is being reconstructed throughout Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Donor assistance for the process remains imperative, since the two-pronged policy, of facilitating return and fostering economic conditions that allow returnees to reestablish their livelihoods, requires comprehensive and sustained economic

engagement from the International Community. The dividend from this engagement is clear, as the ambassadors were able to see during their tour today. Hundreds of thousands of people have been able to go home a basic human right. These people are being brought into the productive economic mainstream so that their efforts help to consolidate a normal society in Bosnia and Herzegovina. a.