

# **Brcko Reconstruction and Return Task Force Completes its Mission**

The Acting Supervisor of Brcko, Gerhard Sontheim, today announced that the Reconstruction and Return Task Force of OHR Brcko (RRTF) will close on 31 December 2003. Effective 1 January 2004, authority and responsibility for reconstruction and return will rest exclusively with the Brcko District authorities.

The Reconstruction and Return Task Force was established in April 1997, at a time when the property returns situation in the District was discouraging, with over 10,500 abandoned properties, and 24,000 displaced persons who had arrived in the District from other parts of BiH. More than 9,800 of these properties were destroyed. At the time, returns issues were the responsibility of three largely dysfunctional mono-ethnic housing offices based in Brcko, Brka and Ravne Brcko.

The RRTF facilitated the founding of the Brcko Multiethnic Housing Commission in October 1999 as an interim institution prior to the establishment of the Sub-division of DPs, Refugees and Housing Issues within the Government of the Brcko District in October 2000. The Sub-Division was made into a separate Government Department in March 2001.

The RRTF worked closely with the Department of DPs, Refugees and Housing Issues to pass the District Law on Return of Abandoned Properties in April 2001, and to adopt some necessary amendments to that law in July 2002.

All of the 10,500 property return claims which have been submitted have now been resolved, and full implementation is scheduled for the end of November 2003.

Acting Supervisor Sontheim thanks all those organizations which have provided assistance to property reconstruction in the District: the Dutch, Norwegian, Japanese and Saudi governments, the European Commission, SFOR, USAID, and the US Bureau for Population and Refugee Movement.. He also expresses his appreciation for the support from the RS Government, the Federation Government and Tuzla Canton.

The Acting Supervisor is grateful to the de-mining project donors who have supported safe returns and economic development, including the Greek Government, the US Office of Humanitarian Demining Programs, the US Department of Agriculture, the EU and the International Trust Fund.

The Acting Supervisor reminds the public that much more remains to be done in the field of reconstruction and return. Priorities should be:

First, a program to reconstruct some 1,700 devastated properties.

Second, the on-going Government project to repair 2,300 damaged housing units (up to 10,000 KM per unit) Third, a program to repair and reconstruct some 184 devastated socially-owned properties by the end of March 2004. Currently, the Department for DPs, Refugees and Housing Issues is conducting a survey among local communities in the District to establish priorities for the reconstruction and repair programs. The District Government will establish application criteria and assign the funds needed.

Fourth, support returns for those displaced persons in Brcko who wish to return to the Federation. OHR is satisfied with the fact that the District now participates in the work of the BiH State Commission for Returns as a voting member. The District Government and OHR Brcko will meet with the State Commission for Returns in November this year, and will discuss concrete return projects.