High Representative meets Displaced Persons and Refugee Associations

Today, the High Representative met with representatives of 24 displaced persons and refugee (DPRE) associations from across Bosnia and Herzegovina to hear their opinions about the returns process and encourage them to insist on their rights.

In his introductory remarks, the High Representative emphasized the important role of DPRE associations in the return process. “It is not the International Community which has to take the lead,” he said. “It is also not just the politicians of this country. What is very important is that the people themselves, the citizens of this country, take Ownership of their own future. This is key word: Ownership, which we are trying to translate into your local languages by calling it odgovornost. That is the reason why I am so keen to work with you, to cooperate with you to build a civil society in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I want to listen to you, I want to hear your views. You are the active segment of the civil society which is building up in this country.”

During an intensive two-hour discussion, the DPRE representatives expressed support for the measures the High Representative has taken so far to further the return process – in particular in the field of property and housing legislation -, and made a series of proposals how to accelerate the process. They included harsher measures against those who abuse housing space, different ways of financing return and its sustainability, and the dismissal of obstructive officials. The DPRE representatives also asked for the arrest of all indicted war criminals and a joint multi-ethnic school curriculum.

The High Representative stressed the importance of return and of the efficient implementation of the property and housing laws for the democratic development of Bosnia and Herzegovina. “Late last year I put in place new legislation to speed up return,” he said. “With this, I also wanted to express my conviction that return is the single most important issue for the reconstruction of Bosnia and Herzegovina as a state. No political, economic as well as cultural development will be possible without the solution of the return issue. The Rule of Law is fundamental to any democratic community and state. I have been disappointed by those who have tried to argue for self-interest and the perpetuation of the ethnic divide over and above the application of justice and equality. I am determined that this should not prevail, and I do hope that you will support me in this. The implementation of the property laws may well be painful for some. But the rules must be followed.”

At the end of the meeting, the High Representative thanked the DPRE representatives for all the information they provided him with, and for their suggestions. “They will help me find better solutions,” he said. “I am more than ever determined to do my utmost to speed up the return process as well as property law implementation and remove the cancer of multiple occupancy.”

The High Representative warned that international funds for Bosnia and Herzegovina were decreasing and that local governments had to get more involved in financing return. “In this respect, the economic development of your country is of crucial importance,” he said. “This will mean jobs and employment for you and your children; better schools, better health care, better hospitals. The economic reform process must be sped up and is, next to return, my second core priority this year.”