

High Representative on World Refugee Day

On the occasion of the United Nations first World Refugee Day, the High Representative, Wolfgang Petritsch, draws attention to the continued urgency of refugee return in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Despite solid achievements in this area, thousands of people displaced by the 1992 – 95 conflict have yet to return to their homes. This is a matter of the utmost concern. Peace and reconciliation cannot be consolidated in Bosnia and Herzegovina as long as any of its citizens is denied the right to return to their property. The High Representative reiterates that “accelerating return of displaced persons and refugees with a particular emphasis on enabling citizens to exercise their property rights” as one of the three top priorities set by the Peace Implementation Council at its meeting in Brussels in May 2000.

Five years after the war ended, displacement still affects every aspect of life. Although almost 370,000 displaced people and refugees have returned to their homes, many face further difficulties in their efforts to re-establish a normal life, while of the 518,000 still displaced within the borders of BiH, many are still unable to repossess their property.

In 2000, there were more In 2000, there were more than 67,000 registered returns of people going 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 nearly doubled, compared to the same period last year. In the first 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 210,000. In many cases, these people have gone back to areas where the worst excesses of ethnic cleansing were committed during the 92-95

war.

The High Representative remains concerned that the rate of Property Law Implementation is not increasing fast enough and varies widely throughout BiH and will continue his efforts to secure refugees their right to return. However, for the process to work effectively, ownership of the process, with all of its legal and political obligations, must be established throughout BiH, and we fully expect the new governments to meet all of their obligations in this regard.