

# **OHR (S) reply to the open letter of the Association of Expelled Mostarians**

In reference to the letter written by the Association of Expelled Mostarians, signed by Mr. Milan Jovicic and addressed to Mr Westendorp, the High Representative, which openly criticised the work of OHR South in Mostar in respect of the returns process, we would like to state the following.

During the past 18 months, nearly 3000 families have returned to there former homes in Canton 7, under what we refer to as Phase I returns, that is to empty and damaged houses. In supporting the process, the International Community currently has invested some 69 million DEM in the re-construction of homes and infrastructure. Despite many setbacks, co-operation with local authorities for these returns has been steadily improving and we are confident that we will see an increasing number of returns to empty and damaged property in the future.

However, our office, along with other lead agencies, have been actively pursuing returns to illegally occupied homes in the region, also in the City of Mostar where double occupancy and illegal occupancy are a major obstacle to returns.

It must be understood by all the citizens that it is first of all the responsibility of the local authorities, through the due process of law, to ensure that the citizens are able to freely return to their homes. Indeed, this right is a key component of the Dayton Peace Agreement. The OHR (S) ably supported by other International Agencies, have spent a considerable amount of time in trying to ensure that the rights of the citizens to return are upheld.

While there was visible progress in the returns process late last year and early this year, unfortunately a slow down of

the process is observed recently. There are some circles trying to decrease the rate of return of Displaced Persons within Mostar. However, this cannot influence the determination of our office to pursue the policy of constant negotiations and, if needed, pressure to accomplish the difficult task for people to return to their former homes. The citizens of Mostar have our absolute assurance that the staff of the regional office of OHR in Mostar will continue to work to ensure that the people can return to their pre-war homes freely and without prejudice.