OHR RRTF Report April 1997

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Report

“Reconstruction and Return Task Force”

April 1997

2. Current Status

2.1. Lessons learned

An important trend, witnessed in 1996, was that almost all returns (including re-locations) were to places where the returnee’s own group currently represents the majority and administers the area. Until the political focus changes from one of separation to reconciliation and a secure environment, this trend of majority returns and re-locations is likely to continue.

Significantly, 90% of all repatriation and return movements were spontaneous and did not form part of organised operations. The timing and likely destination of return depended largely on many factors beyond the control of outside actors. In addition to political and human rights obstacles, the lack of housing, employment opportunities, and the widespread presence of mines also constituted major impediments to return. The vast majority of people who returned did so between May and September – after the end of the school year and during the best period for reconstruction.

The return must take place in a manner which does not de-stabilise the delicate peace throughout the country. Co-operation towards a smooth return process by both the

authorities of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the governments in countries of asylum is therefore required. Tables 1 and 2 in annex 1 provide statistical information on repatriation from abroad and in-country returns of displaced persons in 1996.

2.2. Origin and distribution of refugees and displaced persons

The origin and distribution of refugees is set out in the tables 3 and 4 in annex 1. Information provided in the first table is based on extrapolations from a sample of 20,000 respondents to a joint IOM/UNHCR questionnaire in Germany. The second table is compiled by UNHCR on information provided by the Governments of countries hosting refugees. As can be seen from the latter, 385,000 of the 1.2 million Bosnians who sought refuge abroad have already found a durable solution by being granted a more permanent status, a new citizenship, or by having repatriated to Bosnia and Herzegovina (88,000) or having been resettled to third countries.
The remaining 835,000 are still in need of durable solutions which will consist of local integration, resettlement to third countries and, for the vast majority, repatriation. It is expected that some 200,000 persons will repatriate to Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1997, of whom 75% will return to the Federation and 25% to Republika Srpska as indicated in table 5 in annex 1.

As for the origin and distribution of the displaced population, available statistics need to be clarified and corroborated through joint census-taking exercises in both the Federation and Republika Srpska. Currently, UNHCR and the Federation authorities use a working figure of 450,000 displaced persons in this entity. In the Republika Srpska the authorities estimate the number of displaced persons at 416,000.

A significant number of all displaced persons are considered to be internally displaced within their own majority areas. Physical destruction of their living space is therefore the

main impediment against their return. Some displaced persons freely chose to remain in their place of displacement, some returned to their homes of origin and many others would like to return but are impeded for various reasons from doing so. Details of return movements of displaced persons are given in annex 1.

In 1997 it is expected that some 30,000 displaced persons will return to their homes in the other entity in an organised manner. This depends on the willingness of the authorities to allow minority returns and on the availability of international support for these return projects.

Return is dependent on actions by the governments of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The policies of Republika Srpska aim exclusively at the local integration of displaced persons and repatriates of Serb ethnicity into its territory, including plans for demographic consolidation. Furthermore, the amnesty legislation in Republika Srpska has a chilling effect on return and repatriation.

On the other hand, preparations for a massive inflow of repatriates into the territory of the Federation remain fundamentally inadequate. The division of authority between Federation and Cantonal governments adds to the lack of preparedness to receive repatriates who do not originate from their area of arrival. The practice of allocating housing space often follows criteria of ethnic and political preference. The current laws concerning abandoned property also act as a substantial impediment to return.

The joint statement made in Geneva on 21 March 1997 by Ministers on the central and Entity level is a step in the right direction.

The recently established Repatriation Information Centre (RIC) is expected to play an important role in the furthering of the link between return and reconstruction. This centre will serve

as a clearing house for information to be shared between all concerned institutions to ensure that repatriation is planned taking due account of various elements, such as housing, employment, reconstruction efforts, basic infrastructure, security and human rights.

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Office of the High Representative Reconstruction and Return Task Force