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Annex 7

UNHCR's "Open Cities" Initiative

The UNHCR "Open Cities" initiative aims at encouraging cities or municipalities, where reconciliation between ethnic communities is possible, to declare publicly their willingness to allow minority groups to return to their former homes and participate as full members of the community. Where such willingness has been demonstrated with actual returns, the community should be immediately "rewarded" and supported with international assistance.

Recognition of an Open City is a simple process based on clear and common criteria. Once a community "volunteers" itself as open, UNHCR and interested international agencies will meet with the local authorities to ensure that their commitment is genuine and that the community meets the basic criteria for being considered an Open City. These include:

- genuine and consistent political will demonstrated by the local authorities after publicly declaring to be Open Cities;
- confirmation that minority returns are occurring or will take place without any abuse of these minorities;
- confirmation that local authorities are genuinely committed to consistent and equal support for all members of the population for which they are responsible, including:
    - a demonstrated willingness by local authorities and the existing community to reintegrate minorities into the normal life of the community;
    - equal rights and opportunities for employment, education and appointment to public office;

        - freedom of movement which remains a fundamental pre-requisite for viable minority returns; assessment visits by minorities will be encouraged; and
        - respect for human rights (to be monitored carefully by international organisations on the ground) to avoid abuses, discrimination, criminality, restrictions to freedom of movement and security incidents indicating a lack of equal opportunity for minorities; and
    - confirmation that these human rights criteria have been applied to minorities who remained in the community or who returned earlier;
    - due recognition of the relative numbers of minority returnees (e.g. the return of three families to a remote village compared with hundreds of families to a majority, or a small number of villages compared with a large geographic area);
    - the demonstrated impartiality and involvement of the local police, in co-operation with IPTF as needed, in ensuring that security, law and order prevail for all. The integration of returnees into the local police force is to be encouraged; and
    - a positive use of the media to prepare the resident community for the return of minorities, to invite minorities to return and to promote reconciliation. Inflammatory statements must be banned.

The process does not end with recognition, as UNHCR staff and members of other international organisations will continue to monitor progress and foster sustained commitment to minority return and reintegration or suggest that support be redirected where this commitment has been lost. Thus, the implementation of assistance projects will be rapid, community based and designed to be handed over to the local authorities. Assistance will be incremental, in accordance with progress, and flexible enough to meet specific needs identified by the

community.

Since its launch by the High Commissioner in March 1997, UNHCR's initiative has been warmly welcomed by the international community, which shows signs of actively supporting the programme. For the project to be effective, common application of the criteria and co-ordinated assistance is vital. UNHCR particularly welcomes the early support of the US government which has already allocated US$ 5 million for Open City Support projects which will benefit some 10 municipalities.

UNHCR is encouraging returns both within and between the two entities. It is hoped that the lists of potential and real Open Cities will grow over time, as communities and their leaders see the positive results which follow the reintegration of minority groups.

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