At a Glance:

- Dramatic increase in the number of registered minority returns in Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Simplified return procedures in Bosnia and Herzegovina remove last legal impediment to return
- Croatian parliament amends Law on Reconstruction
- Croatia announces simplified administrative return procedures
- Humanitarian Pillar of UNMIK phases-out end June
- Field staff report deterioration in situation of ethnic minorities in Kosovo
- UNHCR organises inter-community dialogue between ethnic Albanian and Roma leaders
- Registration reveals some 220,000 internally displaced persons from Kosovo in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

Bosnia and Herzegovina

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the number of displaced and refugees returning to their pre-war homes has dramatically increased this year. The total number of registered minority returns during the first four months of the year reached almost 12,000, compared to just 3,500 during the same period in 1999. As a result of an improvement in the security situation across the country, people have been returning to some of the most difficult areas, where only a year ago it would have been hard to imagine that this would be possible. For example, minorities are now returning to towns such as Foca, Gorazde, Prijedor, Zepa and Stolac. In addition, property laws passed in 1999 are starting to be implemented in an increasing number of urban areas, removing one of the main legal impediments to return. In the first week of June, the State and Entity authorities also signed a Protocol on Simplified Return Procedures, which will allow refugees without valid travel documents to return, thereby removing the last major legal impediment to the return process in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Croatia

Some 6,000 refugees have returned to Croatia this year, while another 4,500 internally displaced persons have been able to go back to their pre-war homes. Many more refugees are believed to have returned but have not yet registered with local authorities. UNHCR and other international organisations will be assisting the
Government of Croatia during the coming months to conduct a village-to-village survey to gain a more realistic picture of the situation on the ground.

A number of legislative and administrative reforms impacting the right to return and treatment of returnees have also taken place. On 1 June, Amendments to the Law on Reconstruction were passed by the Croatian parliament, which will enable access to reconstruction assistance for all returnees, regardless of ethnicity. The government also agreed this month to simplify cumbersome administrative procedures on return. Under the new system, the backlog in return applications will be processed by end June, all return applications will then be processed within one month, and approval will no longer be linked to the state of the returnees’ property. If the returnees’ property is destroyed, approval will now be granted so long as the returnee has alternative, temporary accommodation. These changes represent a significant step forward, and should enable some 10,000 pending or deferred applications from refugees in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to be processed quickly.

In another positive move, the Government of Croatia has also requested a loan from the Development Bank of the Council of Europe for more than 50 million EUROs for housing for returnees, or those who are currently occupying their properties.

More Action Still Needed

While these are encouraging developments, a number of important steps still need to be taken to support return both in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. Access to property and obstruction of return by local officials remain a problem in both countries. UNHCR continues to work closely with both governments to ensure progress in these crucial areas.

Stability Pact Initiatives

Over the past two months, UNHCR has appealed to the international donor community to match the increased level of returns with appropriate funding for the reconstruction effort, in particular to ensure that returnees will have adequate shelter for the coming winter. A series of projects to support reconstruction, socio-economic development and job creation in return areas have been submitted through UNHCR by the Governments of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina under the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe. The Stability Pact Funding Conference held in Brussels on 29 and 30 March 2000 generated an estimated 40 million EURO of fresh pledges to support return projects in both Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. An Ad Hoc Steering Group on refugee return, co-chaired by Mr. Hans Koschnick and UNHCR, has been established to facilitate proper co-ordination of the funding and implementation of the return projects. The Steering Group meets for the third time in Zagreb on 20 June.

UNHCR appealed to donors both at the Peace Implementation Council on 23 – 24 May, and again at the meeting of the Regional Table of the Stability Pact on 8 June, to ensure that adequate and flexible funding is reserved to support return and reconstruction during 2000 and 2001. At this stage, the current financial situation is such that, despite the ongoing programmes and new pledges of contributions under the Stability Pact, return-related activities for 2000 will not be able to meet all needs. The next two years will be crucial for the international community and the countries in the region to seize the momentum on returns which has already been gained, and to ensure that accelerated minority returns take place.

The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

In recognition of the improved climate for returns in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, UNHCR has stepped up efforts in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) to promote returns. The Repatriation Unit of UNHCR’s Office in Belgrade has been strengthened with additional staff, and cross border coordination with UNHCR Offices in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia has become more systematised – including the setting up of meetings between UNHCR Croatia/FRY with Croatian authorities every two weeks to discuss specific details of the return process. UNHCR has also been
working with local authorities in FRY to identify more people who wish to take advantage of the return programme. A joint mass information campaign was launched with the government authorities at the end of May. Some 10,000 refugees have applied for return from FRY who have not yet returned and/or who are waiting for their cases to be processed. It is expected that a new refugee registration exercise will be conducted during the autumn, which should give a better picture of the refugee situation in FRY.

**KOSOVO**

At the beginning of June, more than 850,000 Kosovo Albanians had returned to Kosovo. Of this group, some 150,000 returned in an organised manner, mostly with the assistance of the International Organisation for Migration and UNHCR. It is estimated that some 14,000 refugees from Kosovo, including Albanians, Serbs and Roma, remain in neighbouring countries, while around 220,000 primarily Serbs, Roma and other minorities from Kosovo are internally displaced in Serbia and Montenegro.

**Transition from Humanitarian Emergency Relief to Reconstruction**

The emergency relief effort in Kosovo led by the Humanitarian Affairs Pillar of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and UNHCR has been one of the largest-ever per capita international relief operations ever. This programme is now winding down as the emergency relief needs of Kosovo have been successfully met. Since Spring 2000, humanitarian agencies have been focussing their efforts on assisting UNMIK in the transition from humanitarian emergency to longer-term rehabilitation and development.

UNMIK’s Humanitarian Affairs Pillar will cease to exist as a formal component within the UNMIK structure by the end of June. The head of the pillar, Deputy SRSG and UNHCR’s Special Envoy Dennis McNamara, will also leave Kosovo at the end of June. A UN Humanitarian Coordinator named by UNHCR will provide coordination of the remaining humanitarian activities and continue to facilitate the transition to reconstruction and development in close cooperation with UNMIK’s three remaining pillars and the interim joint administration. Many of the activities in the humanitarian area, particularly with respect to social welfare and housing reconstruction, will be taken over by UNMIK/the joint administration.

**Protecting and Assisting Non-Albanians**

On 9 June, UNHCR and OSCE released their fifth joint update on the situation of ethnic minorities in Kosovo. The report finds that the overall level of killings, violence and harassment against non-Albanians remains at an unacceptably high level. It notes, for example, that between February and May, a total of 26 Serbs were murdered and 105 Serb homes were burned. Nearly 50 suffered aggravated assault.

The report also provides an in-depth analysis of the impact of the adverse security situation, and the consequent restrictions on freedom of movement which lead to difficulties for non-Albanian populations in accessing basic public services, especially health care, education, social welfare and public utilities. These have been determining factors in the continued departure of Kosovo Serbs and other non-Albanian groups from Kosovo. To give just a few examples - during the month of April, some 50 Kosovo Serb families (over 145 people) sold their properties in the city of Gnjilane and left for Serbia. In the city of Pristina, the last three Kosovo Serb families from one particular apartment block left for Serbia during April as well.

A major focus of UNHCR’s activities will continue to be to provide material assistance and promote respect for the rights of non-Albanian communities, and to liaise with NATO to ensure their effective protection. UNHCR buslines, with security escorts from KFOR, continue to provide a key lifeline for many isolated ethnic minorities across the province. During May, there was a noticeable increase in the use of the UNHCR buses by the Kosovo Serb and Roma/Ashkalija populations, with over 1,000 persons being transported per day in some areas.
UNHCR is also carrying out confidence-building projects and promoting inter-community dialogue aimed at creating an environment conducive to the eventual return of non-Albanian groups. Since February 2000, UNHCR has held a series of Humanitarian Round Table discussions on the situation of the Roma, Ashkalija and Egyptian populations. The third of these meetings took place on 12 April and brought together for the first time representatives of Roma, Ashkalija and Egyptian communities with Kosovo Albanian political leaders. At the end of the meeting, the leaders of both ethnic groups adopted a joint declaration condemning violence and supporting inter-ethnic tolerance and the principle of minority return. The Round Table also led to the adoption of a Platform for Joint Action to solve the problems of Roma communities by leaders of all ethnic groups at the Interim Administrative Council and the Kosovo Transitional Council.

To aid the implementation of the Platform for Joint Action, on 7 June UNHCR organised a visit of Kosovar Albanian leaders of the Interim Administrative Council to Roma and Ashkalija communities in Prizren and Urosevac, to demonstrate their commitment to take the commitments made at the political level to the community level. The visit was seen as an historic, confidence-building step, and as a major stepping stone towards the return of Roma, Ashkalija and Egyptian communities to Kosovo. A second round of these visits to other areas is planned for the end of June.

Returns to Kosovo

Non-Albanians: The treatment of non-Albanians remaining in Kosovo is directly linked to the existence of conditions for the return of those who have already left. While UNHCR hopes that the current displacement from Kosovo will be temporary, and expects to eventually assist people to return to their homes once conditions improve, basic conditions for safe and sustainable return of non-Albanians do not yet exist in most parts of Kosovo.

A Joint Commission on Returns (JCR) for Kosovo Serbs was established by UNMIK in early May to explore prospects for safe, orderly and sustainable return, and to coordinate initiatives in this regard. UNHCR is actively engaged in the JCR. Several missions were fielded in different locations during May in order to assess their feasibility for returns, and to work on improved conditions.

The Platform for Action for Roma, Ashkalija and Egyptian communities lays the basis for the creation of conditions which will foster the return of these communities. Small groups of Roma from FYROM and Montenegro have spontaneously returned to Kosovo in the past three weeks. Within the general framework of the Platform for Action, UNHCR is actively pursuing “go and see” visits, which would permit displaced Roma, Ashkalija and Egyptians to take informed decisions about their return at this stage. The first “go and see” visits of Roma displaced persons from Montenegro to a carefully selected area in Pec were conducted in the last week of May, with several of those involved in the visit agreeing to return. Further “go and see” visits from Montenegro are planned during June.

Kosovo Albanians: Since spring 2000, the voluntary repatriation of Kosovar Albanians has been accompanied by increasing numbers of involuntary returns from Western European and other countries. Between 1,500 – 3,500 Kosovars per week are returning from these countries in both voluntary and involuntary movements. At the end of May, some 1,400 Kosovars had been forcibly returned since early March, primarily from Germany and Switzerland.

The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

During May, the joint registration of internally displaced persons from Kosovo was finalised. The exercise was conducted by the Yugoslav authorities with support from UNHCR and was independently monitored by the Swiss government. This exercise, and the earlier registration conducted in Montenegro, revealed that some 188,000 displaced people from Kosovo have registered in Serbia, while 31,000 have registered in Montenegro.
OTHER TOPICS

Peace Implementation Council

The Ministerial Meeting of the Peace Implementation Council was held in Brussels from 23 – 24 May 2000. UNHCR’s Assistant High Commissioner, Soren Jessen-Petersen briefed the meeting on progress on returns to Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, and emphasised that 2000 and 2001 might be the last chance for minority returns in the region. He stressed the need for the international community to give the return process a decisive push forward by providing the proper financial and political support.

Instability in Southern Serbia

Tensions in Southern Serbia, which had lessened since March, appeared to increase during the final weeks in May, after KFOR reports of instability and skirmishes between Serb security forces and Albanian separatists near the village of Konculj in the Bujanovic municipality. Some 12 ethnic Albanian families crossed the border into the Gnjilane area of Kosovo on 25 May, citing violence as the reason for leaving Southern Serbia, while another 20 individuals registered as new arrivals in the Vitina municipality in the same week. Most of the new arrivals were women and children. The arrival of newly displaced Albanians from Southern Serbia inevitably raises concerns that pressure on ethnic Serbs in the region will increase.

Albania and The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia

In Albania and The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, in addition to continuing to assist the government with the remaining small number of refugees from Kosovo, UNHCR’s post-emergency focus is on promotional and capacity building activities to support the development of asylum legislation and the establishment and effective implementation of refugee status determination procedures. In FYR of Macedonia, the new asylum bill was presented to parliament on 6 June. In Albania, UNHCR has also been actively participating in the discussion on trafficking and illegal migration, which is a major challenge for the Government. A referral structure is being established in conjunction with relevant international organisations (IOM and NGOs) to assist persons trafficked, in many cases against their will, in returning home voluntarily from Albania.

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