

On the Record: Refugee Returns to Srebrenica

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The Changing Face of Srebrenica

The face of Srebrenica is gradually changing. Local NGOs continue to struggle for return and reconstruction in Srebrenica, and their dedication in the face of tragedy and stagnation is an inspiration. Meanwhile, some international organizations -- the UNDP prominent among them -- continue to assist in rebuilding Srebrenica, but other organizations are pulling up stakes and leaving.

In 2002 several hundred families of displaced Muslims returned to Srebrenica municipality. Evictions of displaced Serbs living in Muslim-owned homes sped up last year; many Serb families have left Srebrenica, either for their pre-war homes or for other parts of the Republika Srpska. The Muslim presence in Srebrenica is gradually growing. There are around 20 Muslim students in the Srebrenica schools today, and there is one Muslim teacher. Srebrenica is essentially free of incidents that threaten the security of the returnees who, unlike in previous years, wander around the town greeting their friends without looking over their shoulders.

Resolution of requests for the return of property to displaced persons has surpassed 80% in the municipality. However, not all of these people have returned; there are currently more Srebrenicans in the United States than there are in Srebrenica. The reason: there are more jobs in the U.S.

Meanwhile, the UNDP is coordinating reconstruction in the municipality, and a number of important repair projects are under way. Lamp posts have sprouted all along the main road; during the snowy days of December, work crews were seen pouring concrete to hold the new lamps, which finally began illuminating Srebrenica in February. The muddy road to Osmaće was improved, and THW and UMCOR, two international relief agencies, are working on the vexatious problem of safe drinking water.

One of the most conspicuous projects is the preparation of the field in Potočari where the cemetery and commemorative center are being prepared for the victims of the 1995 massacre. In 2001 a cornerstone was laid for the commemorative center; today bulldozers are leveling the vast grounds, and a lengthy concrete fence has enclosed the field.

Mercy Corps-Scotland and the Danish Refugee Council, both of which played a very important role in early reconstruction attempts, left Srebrenica at the end of last year. The decrease in international attention to Srebrenica is partly compensated by the presence of the volunteer organization, the Werkgroep Nederland-Srebrenica, the only foreigners who live in Srebrenica. The Werkgroep implemented a number of encouraging projects in the past year: a children's circus in September, restoration of the city park; provision of computer and English classes through local organizations; and donation of tools to a number of villages around the municipality.

The Forum of Srebrenica NGOs

The Forum of Srebrenica NGOs is expanding its membership from the eight original members. At the beginning of this year, the Forum put out an invitation for new organizations to join the

network. This invitation was extended to Srebrenica's neighboring municipalities of Milići and Bratunac as well, because the Forum's coordinators consider it important to expand its network in this area that is, in any case, quite interdependent.

With this development, the Forum of Srebrenica NGOs is becoming a regional network. The membership of the Forum has been filled out with a total of ten new organizations. Several of these are from Bratunac municipality.

The Forum's new members thus bring its number up to sixteen organizations. Among the new organizations are Leptir, Priroda, Maja, and the Association of Srebrenica Citizens "Danas-Sutra." (Today-Tomorrow).

Leptir ("Butterfly") is an organization of parents of mentally and physically disabled people in Srebrenica and nearby Bratunac. The organization was founded because there were no public services provided to disabled people, who were suffering from discrimination and stigmatization. There has been no special education available for the disabled, some of whom therefore have been compelled to attend school in Serbia. Leptir was founded in 1998, and opened an office in Srebrenica's Cultural Center last December. With over 150 members, Leptir advocates for equal rights for approximately 100 developmentally disabled people in the region.

"Maja" Women's Association of Kravica is an organization that supports women returnees to this small rural town, and their families. Kravica was the scene of fierce fighting during the war, and both the Serb and Muslim population, at different times, were brutalized and displaced. The recreation of a multi-ethnic community was difficult, but Maja has played a role in contributing to the easing of tensions. Kravica is not geographically remote, but there is no television service there, bus service is sketchy, and it was only when Maja intervened that telephones were reintroduced. Maja especially devotes resources to agricultural projects that support local families in need.

With the new year, the Forum elected new officers. Vesna Jovanović, director of Amica, is president of the Forum. Zulfo Salihović of Drina is vice-president, and Stana Medić of SARA is president of the board of administrators.

Property Claims - Resolution and Return

The Return and Reconstruction Task Force, an institution established by the Dayton agreement, manages the Property Law Implementation Program (PLIP), which oversees the resolution of property return claims and the handover of property to its pre-war owners. With the ongoing standardization of property return laws since 1999, together with increasing pressure from the international community, this program has been increasingly successful. By summer 2003, the Bosnia-wide rate of PLIP implementation had reached 78%: In the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina implementation stands at 82%; in the Republika Srpska 72%, and in Brčko District it is 81%. Out of a total of 227,598 claims that have been presented, almost 180,000 have been resolved.

Property claims resolution in Srebrenica, approaching 80%, is thus on a par with the rest of the

country. The process of resolving property claims in this municipality is expected to be concluded by the fall of this year.

However, property claims resolution and return are two different things. After a claim is resolved, the property usually must be repaired. There are still cases of temporary residents pillaging the apartments they have occupied upon departure. Houses that have been devastated and thus not occupied must be repaired, and the water and electricity attached. There are cases of returnees moving into their homes and "camping" without water or electricity, because they cannot afford the utility hookup fees.

If returnees overcome these obstacles in some manner, they are still confronted with the problem of employment. Would-be returnees often repeat the phrase, "You can't feed yourself with four blank walls." The economy of Srebrenica remains notoriously weak.

Given these problems, return has been slow. There is plenty of work in the villages, and possibilities to get food, but life there is almost completely unsupported by social services. In a municipality that once had over 200 villages, there are almost no schools or clinics, and likewise almost no electric or water utility services. These problems are being attacked, but their resolution is very slow.

By late May, UNHCR statistics listed over 1,340 registered returns to Srebrenica, up from 1,170 a month earlier. Unofficial estimates run several hundred higher, but with temporary returns, visits, part-time stays, and unregistered returns, there are no exact figures. The return season is now in full swing. Houses and roads are being fixed, and some utilities repaired -- but real return will depend on employment.

Reconstruction in Srebrenica Municipality

Reconstruction of the devastated municipality of Srebrenica began three years ago, and has now gathered great momentum. Many international non-governmental and inter-governmental organizations are involved. But there are persistent questions about the way reconstruction is being implemented, and whether it will succeed in restoring the municipality's pre-war vitality.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) leads the way in organizing and sponsoring reconstruction of Srebrenica, together with the two neighboring municipalities of Milići and Bratunac. A three-year, \$12.5 million plan put together last year attracted promises of several million dollars at a New York donor conference in May of 2002, and promised funding is now up to \$5.1 million.

The UNDP reconstruction program, titled the Srebrenica Regional Recovery Programme (SRRP), focuses on four "pillars": housing, local government, civil society, and economic development. Around ten countries are currently donating, including Canada, the United States, Japan, Italy, and Denmark. The Republika Srpska (Serb entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina) is one of the largest donors, and is the only donor not to have earmarked its donation for any specific activity.

Projects that the UNDP is supporting include road and bridge reconstruction, provision of seed and fertilizer to over 200 families, and development of a mobile clinic in cooperation with Srebrenica municipality and the local hospital. There are other mobile clinics functioning in the municipality, but this will be the first one under the administration of the hospital.

The UNDP is coordinating free bus lines for returnees from Sarajevo and Tuzla Cantons, two times a week. These buses run via Bratunac, where displaced people are also returning, and they go all the way out to the extreme ends of Srebrenica municipality, to Sase and Skelani towns.

In civil society development, the UNDP is helping youth groups in all three municipalities organize youth councils. These organizations will advocate for the needs of youth at the level of local government. As part of this program, the UNDP is providing leadership training to young activists. The youth council is intended to become a registered NGO.

The UNDP is also implementing a program of training for activists from all NGOs throughout the region. NGOs are categorized based on a survey conducted by the UNDP, evaluating their capacity, infrastructure, and communications ability. Based on this evaluation of level of readiness, each organization is provided with one of three different levels of training in the following areas: grant-writing, networking, organizational management, advocacy, and fundraising. After each training the NGOs can apply for grants. UNDP Deputy Programme Manager Aleksandra Stiklica noted that the most well-prepared NGOs in the area are Sara (Srebrenica), Amica (Srebrenica), Želja (Skelani), Priroda (Bratunac), and the Women's Forum of Bratunac. All of these organizations are members of the Forum of Srebrenica NGOs.

Many agencies besides the UNDP are involved in reconstruction in Srebrenica. Among the most active are CARE, Mercy Corps-Scotland, UMCOR, Swiss Caritas, Austria Hilfswerk, and THW. Together with agencies of the governments of the Federation and the Republika Srpska, these organizations are restoring, or preparing to restore, a total of 221 houses in at least a dozen villages and towns in the municipality. The Malaysian government has also funded the reconstruction of dozens of homes.

Besides repair of homes, a number of important development projects are being implemented as well. USAID is preparing a large power-generation project for Srebrenica municipality. The UNHCR has donated dairy equipment to a dairy in Zvornik, which has agreed to buy milk from returnee communities in Srebrenica. To date 120 families in the municipality have signed contracts to sell milk. In other development programs, Tuzla IRC is providing credit to 52 families for production of agricultural goods for sale, and Mercy Corps has approved 11 applications for small businesses support.

Given all these activities, one would think that Srebrenica municipality has become a magnet attracting enthusiastic returnees. However, the prevailing mood among returnees is one of frustration, even suspicion. Part of the problem is lack of information -- people ask where the \$12 million of UNDP funds has gone, not realizing that this amount has not yet even been donated. But in spite of continuing reconstruction efforts, and very gradual improvement in general conditions, most Srebrenicans do not have work -- and those who are employed are disproportionately people who were not residents of Srebrenica before the war.

Enes Dozić, attorney for the Municipal Office of the Ministry for Refugees (OMI), suggested that the UNDP's focus on small businesses is misdirected. The funding cap on economic projects supported by the UNDP tends to be 10,000 to 15,000 KM (\$6,000 to \$9,000). Mr. Dozić asserted that rather than supporting a number of small businesses that employ a few people, it would be better to re-start some of the industries that used to thrive in Srebrenica. Each industry should employ at least 100 workers.

Senad Subašić is an engineer and works for Srebrenica municipality as a consultant in economic development. He commented that before the war, during the tourist season a remarkable 1,700 to 2,000 people visited Srebrenica each day. Private houses were filled with overnight guests, and a homeowner could buy a new car with tourism earnings from one year. Mr. Subašić felt that it would make a significant impact on the local economy if even a fraction of that number of visitors could be attracted by restoring the Guber mineral springs.

Mr. Subašić criticized the UNDP for its even apportionment of funds among Milići, Bratunac, and Srebrenica municipalities. Since far more Srebrenicans were displaced than residents of the other two municipalities -- all Srebrenicans were displaced at different times -- he suggested that the UNDP allocate 60% of its funds to Srebrenica. This, he felt, would compensate for the disadvantaged position of displaced people, which makes it more difficult for them to apply for aid.

Another criticism leveled by Mr. Subašić is directed at what he calls "uncontrolled transfers." He gave an example of 34 million KM that was donated to Srebrenica by the Dutch government, saying that very little of these funds, after passing through various middlemen, actually reached Srebrenica. As a remedy, he called for the presence of donor representatives on the ground to monitor the fate of their grants.

Mr. Subašić described some encouraging programs supported by his government. With Quick Impact Funds from the European Union, Srebrenica municipality has founded an "Incubation Center" that will house 7 small businesses by late summer. One, a furniture shop, has already opened. Each of these businesses is to employ around ten workers. New businesses will have up to three years to establish themselves before they must relocate and make room for other startups.

As economic advisor to Srebrenica's municipal government, Mr. Subašić has developed a global plan for rational development of the area. This plan encompasses education, support services such as the Incubator Center, and tax relief for new businesses. It foresees exploitation of the region's abundant natural resources that are unspoiled by chemicals and other pollution.

Mr. Subašić sees a way out of the discouraging situation caused by war devastation and the slow pace of recovery. He points to the most grassroots institutions -- the villages and the NGOs -- as those that must compensate for the lack of strategy on the part of government at higher levels. Subašić is an avid supporter of the Forum of Srebrenica NGOs and the strengthening of the NGO network. He believes that the development of the NGO sector will result in the overall development of Srebrenica.