

On the Record: Refugee Returns to Srebrenica

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The author of this report, Peter Lippman, was born in Seattle, Washington (USA) and is a long-time human rights activist. He holds a degree in international studies and is fluent in Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian. Peter's dispatches from Bosnia were first published in AP's online newsletter On The Record. The photo shows the first tent encampment at Sućeska, on the hills above Srebrenica, where Muslim refugees stayed for weeks in freezing cold while they were repairing their former houses. Contact Peter at pl52ip@hotmail.com.

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From the AP Editorial Desk

One of the themes running throughout Peter Lippman's series on Bosnia is that only so much can be expected of the international community. If refugees are to regain their homes, it will most likely happen as a result of their own efforts.

Peter's first dispatches told the story of Emsuda Mujagić and her group Srcem do Mira as they braved one disappointment after another to return home to Kozarac, in northwest Bosnia. More recently, Peter visited the tent people of Goražde in their precarious encampment on the inter-entity boundary line in eastern Bosnia.

In this concluding issue of his series, Peter reports on his recent visit to another tent encampment at Sućeska near Srebrenica.

Sućeska has transformed the prospects for Srebrenica's exiles. For four and a half years after the signing of the Dayton Agreement, not a single Muslim returned to live in Srebrenica -- in spite of all the best efforts of activists and the international community. Peter remembers one frustrated refugee telling him that there were more Serb war criminals in The Hague than there were Muslims in Srebrenica.

This is no longer the case. On June 3, a Tuzla-based organization named Srebrenica 99 took over 50 family members back to the village of Sućeska, near Srebrenica, to clean and rebuild their pre-war homes. This was the first group return to the municipality.

The movement back picked up during the summer months. By early August, 200 houses had been cleared of rubble in Sućeska, and 350 families had applied to reclaim their property.

After the July 11 commemoration at Potočari, similar resettlement projects were initiated in villages that were even closer to Srebrenica than Sućeska. These included Podgaj and Bajramovići. At the end of August representatives of 40 families arrived at the villages of Pale (not the former capital of the Republika Srpska), Brosevići, Milačevići, and Sušnjari, all near Potočari.

These brave people have faced the same intimidation that faced earlier pioneers, like Emsuda Mujagić in Kozarac. Fifteen houses were torched in June and July in the Srebrenica area, including several in Sućeska.

Still, they did not give up. Their determination was stiffened by the support of Srebrenica 99. This group is unusual -- perhaps even exemplary. It is composed both of Muslims expelled from Srebrenica and their former Serb neighbors. It seeks to improve communication between the two ethnic groups.

This makes Srebrenica 99 deeply unpopular with the Serbs who currently control Srebrenica. Nor is Srebrenica 99 particularly popular with those Muslims who purportedly want to force the pace of repatriation. The group's strategy is gradualist rather than confrontational, in that it began

by resettling outlying villages around Srebrenica and is working inward toward the town. This has been criticized by some Muslims, who say that 'real return' is to the city. But they have yet to come up with a better solution.

At the other extreme, politicians from the main Muslim party (SDA) criticize Srebrenica 99 for pushing too hard and being too conciliatory toward the Serb enemy.

The question now is whether Srebrenica 99 can keep these critics at bay and build on its successes this summer. Can it turn the bridgehead at Sućeska into something more permanent?

It could be touch and go. The winter in Bosnia is long and harsh. But if the encampments are still standing next spring, returnees could start pouring back to eastern Bosnia, breaking the back of Serb resistance to repatriation once and for all.

On the road to Sućeska with Srebrenica 99

In early July I visited the simple office of Srebrenica 99, an independent, multi-ethnic organization created last year to work for the return of displaced Srebrenicans to their municipality.

I had spoken with leaders of the organization Hakija Meholfjić and Vesna Mustafić on previous occasions. Both are displaced Srebrenicans; Hakija was Srebrenica's police chief during the war, and Vesna is a Serb who is married to a Muslim. Many Srebrenica 99 members are affiliated with the Social Democratic Party (SDP, Bosnia's leading non-nationalist political party): Hakija is chairman of the party's Srebrenica municipal branch. But both Hakija and Vesna insist that Srebrenica 99 itself is politically unaffiliated.

Vesna escaped from Srebrenica in 1992, and Hakija stayed until the fall of the town, when he escaped to Muslim-controlled territory with the large column of refugees that walked through the woods. Both activists now live in Tuzla, where Srebrenica 99 is based.

I had heard that Srebrenica 99 established a small tent encampment at Sućeska, which lies within the area that was 'protected' by the United Nations during the war. Sućeska is a complex of more than 20 villages. Before the war, the community's population was over 3,000. Today they are scattered around Bosnia and the world. Hakija thought that approximately 1,500 might come back.

I asked Vesna and Hakija to explain to me their strategy for return. 'Our approach has been to cultivate relationships with Serbs still living in Srebrenica, former neighbors of ours, who are interested in promoting our return,' said Vesna. 'In 1998 and 1999 we invited some of these people to Tuzla, where there are many displaced Srebrenicans, to build friendly ties with them gradually.'

These efforts resulted in increased contact between Muslims and Srebrenica Serbs. As explained in previous issues, any Serbs in Srebrenica who seem open to a Muslim return face hostility and intimidation from their own politicians. But a tentative groundwork has been laid for better

relations between the two ethnic groups.

It took a long time for a breakthrough to Srebrenica to occur. Official obstruction to Muslim return continued, and the local Serb regime was hostile. The international community seemed at a loss.

Srebrenica 99 decided to take direct measures to break the impasse. Hakija explained, 'We talked to the international community for three years, telling them that we wish to go back to our homes in Srebrenica. There was no assistance from them on this problem. So we decided to take our own steps to return. Our first target is Sućeska.'

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The Sućeska return project began with regular visits in the fall of 1999. Visitors began inspecting their pre-war homes to see what could be cleaned and rebuilt, and cleaning started. Then on June 3, 2000, the first group of people came back to Sućeska and set up tents lent by the U.N. High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). They threw up a kitchen/dining shelter and went to work clearing rubble, preparing their houses for reconstruction.

During the war most houses in the villages around Srebrenica were destroyed. They were bombed and torched, and their roofs caught fire and fell in. But because of the solid stone, cinderblock, and concrete construction, often the walls and floors remained, leaving the hull of a house. In extreme cases the walls have fallen in upon themselves. But there are plenty of shells to rebuild.

Within a month of the arrival in Sućeska, contractors and private owners were replacing roofs, doors, and windows in at least a half-dozen homes. Hakija informed me in early July that Srebrenica 99 planned to resettle four more villages in a similar way this summer, if things went well in Sućeska.

Animosities abound between the activists of Srebrenica 99 and the mainstream Muslim, SDA-affiliated political establishment that controls the Srebrenica municipal council from Tuzla. These animosities have their roots in the war and are obscure to the outside observer. They are also connected with party politics, in spite of Srebrenica 99's purported non-partisanship. The SDA is weakening throughout Bosnia, and the Social Democrats (SDP) are on the rise.

In a more perfect world, return advocates would be truly non-partisan, focused solely on reconciliation. But there is no activism without politics in Bosnia, and no perfect angels leading the displaced population back to their homes. Anyone wanting to support return has to try and find the most honest, most effective, and least prejudiced activists from among an imperfect group of people. Srebrenica 99 may be just that: at least they are showing that they can make return happen.

Immediately after the resettlement of Sućeska, (Muslim) Srebrenica mayor Nesib Mandžić expressed his objections to the project to the OHR. He complained that the return was 'not coordinated with the local authorities.' He warned that such efforts must be organized through

'proper institutions' and must create decent living conditions in order to ensure a lasting return.

The point is a good one, but it has been undermined by Mandžić's failure to create the conditions for return in the town of Srebrenica. He further accused the Srebrenica 99 project of being organized by the SDP for political purposes. It is easy enough to make such an accusation -- but apparently more difficult to offer encouragement and acknowledge that Srebrenica 99 is working toward the goals that Mandžić purportedly holds.

I asked Hakija why Mandžić criticized the Sućeska resettlement. Hakija answered, 'Because he doesn't want anyone to return. Maybe this is Alija's (Izetbegović) idea of a division of Bosnia. All the Srebrenica representatives are in the SDA. They go to the people, and they frighten them. They say that they can't return until the international community has repaired their houses. They aren't concerned about returnees.'

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We talked about reconciliation.

Before the war, Srebrenica's population was approximately 37,000. Muslims accounted for 70 percent. Today, the population stands at approximately 15,000. All are Serbs, and the overwhelming majority are displaced people. There can be no question of a multi-ethnic Srebrenica without some kind of reconciliation between Muslims and Serbs.

The refugees are optimistic about their former neighbors. They feel that these Serbs -- who lived in Srebrenica before the war -- could even act as a catalyst for Muslim return. Back in Tuzla, Ibrahim Hodžić had told me, 'We have good relations with the Serbs who are from Srebrenica. They are all in favor of our return; they say they can hardly wait for us to come back. But they are a small minority of the people there.'

One Serb woman in Srebrenica, Bosa Savić, was quoted in the press as echoing this sentiment: 'I lived better with the Muslims than I do with these people who came later. Two years ago I thought that I would never see a Muslim again. Fortunately, they have started to visit the town, and I drink coffee with each of them in my home.' ('Oslobodjenje,' July 8, 2000)

Vesna Mustafić had the following to say about reconciliation: 'When we decided to form Srebrenica 99, we knew that we would have problems, because we wish to reconcile people. It is not in the interest of the governments for us to return, neither those in the Federation, nor here in Srebrenica. However, we speak with people and try to recreate the trust that we had, because we used to live together, intermarried, became godparents, and friends. That cannot all be erased -- it's impossible.' ('Povratak,' August-September 1999)

Together with the Tuzla Citizens Forum, Srebrenica 99 has organized low-profile encounters between displaced Srebrenicans and their former Serb neighbors. One of the most encouraging projects was a children's summer camp attended by displaced Muslim children and their former Serb playmates who still live in Srebrenica.

'It was on a lake near Teočak, near the inter-entity borderline,' Mustafić recounted. 'There were around 120 people there for 15 days, aged 10 to 30. People swam and played sports. These were displaced Muslims, and Serbs who are from Srebrenica, who still live there. This shows that people can still live together.'

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We talked about relations between Srebrenica 99 and other advocates for return.

Hakija Meholfjić was critical of the fifth anniversary ceremony at Potočari and of the groups that organized, it like Žene Srebrenice (Women of Srebrenica). He predicted that the ceremony would lead to increased tension in relations between Serbs and Muslims. 'I am not for forgetting the past, but we have to look to the future. The women's organizations involved in the commemoration are all with SDA. They have no strategy, no vision for the future.'

It may be true that organizations such as Žene Srebrenice lack a clear strategy, but that does not mean that their work is useless. When I visited Žene Srebrenice before the Potočari event, I was surprised to learn that its leaders did not feel the same hostility toward Srebrenica 99 that Hakija Meholfjić felt toward them. One would wish that Srebrenica 99's leaders could overcome their own prejudices.

I asked Hakija how he would differentiate his organization from the others. 'We must be concerned about those who are living,' he replied. 'We cannot forget the dead, but what about the future? The people are not working. We have to strengthen the economy to get to where we can live without the international community. All of the concentration on the past takes us further away from a solution to our problems.'

Clearly, it would be best if all of these activists could combine what is good in each organization and identify common goals.

The international community has been slow to show support for Srebrenica 99 and the Sućeska tent encampment. When I met with Srebrenica 99 early in July, they were making plans to visit the settlement. On the way, there was to be a meeting in Srebrenica with High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch.

Hakija told me, 'I am going to speak disrespectfully. I am going to say difficult things. For example, Petritsch needs to suspend people from the Srebrenica municipal assembly. The SDA and the SDS [Serb Democratic Party] are working in coalition; they are doing all they can to prevent return. The Muslim nationalist organizations are focusing on laying a [memorial] foundation stone at Potočari, not on return to Srebrenica.'

'We don't know why the international community has not helped us; maybe it suits their goals for us not to return. Now that we have started the project in Sućeska, representatives from the international community are saying that this is the first time that they have heard about our work. Part of the problem is that some of the international officials we are dealing with are third-rate politicians who don't know what they are doing.'

'All of the nationalist-oriented organizations have plenty of money. We, the only multi-ethnic organization, have nothing. We can't even afford paper for the office, let alone connection to the Internet.'

It is always important to filter out hyperbole from such a discourse. If it were true that the international community had not helped Srebrenica 99, returnees to Sućeska would be sleeping in the grass rather than under tents. But Hakija's frustration is nevertheless understandable. Srebrenica 99 requested support for the Sućeska resettlement from several governments, including the Netherlands, Denmark, and the United States, with little response. From the United States, there was simply no answer.

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The next day I traveled with Hakija and Vesna to Srebrenica for their meeting with Petritsch. After that we planned to continue on to the tent encampment of Sućeska. Zulfo Salihović, another participant in the Sućeska resettlement project, arrived in a pickup truck and the four of us set off.

We headed east from Tuzla and, after passing through Kalesija, soon crossed the inter-entity borderline to the Republika Srpska. The Zvornik municipality has one of the highest rates of return of any municipality in Bosnia. Practically every village in the Zvornik area is experiencing reconstruction this year.

As we passed by the rolling hills Hakija said, 'I want to ask you, sincerely, what Americans think about people from Srebrenica. Don't they think we are backwards?' I said that I didn't think Americans thought much about Bosnia anymore at all, let alone about Srebrenicans. It turned out Hakija was referring to the representatives of the international community. His impression is that they think Srebrenicans are morons.

At Zvornik we reached the Drina, the river that separates eastern Bosnia from Serbia. We turned right at Bratunac and headed down to Srebrenica. Passing through Potočari, you couldn't help but notice the former Dutch battalion headquarters, where the evacuations took place. For those who know the history, that place will radiate nightmarish memories forever.

In Srebrenica we pulled up to the Hotel Domavia, where there was more of a crowd than usual. Extra police were providing security for Petritsch's visit, and they waved us into the building. We sat and talked with UNHCR staff member Eleonor Gordon, who works out of Zvornik.

Hakija asked Eleonor for help with the Sućeska resettlement. Eleonor promised some building materials and medical supplies. Hakija asked for water containers and help in getting a used truck, as Srebrenica 99 has no means of transportation.

Soon Vesna, Hakija, and Zulfo went into the conference room with Mr. Petritsch, and I sat and talked with Eleonor.

She told me of the returns so far to Srebrenica. One elderly couple came back in March, and another family arrived a few weeks ago. A third man came home recently and is waiting for the rest of his family. For the moment, that was the extent of it. Yet Eleonor stressed that there are few security worries in Srebrenica. The returnees go out drinking with their neighbors, and that there have been no problems. Vina Lubura of the Office of the High Representative (OHR) backed up this evaluation, and Vesna Mustafić herself told me that she never worries about her safety in Srebrenica. In spite of the arsons, it seems that returning Muslims have not been subject to physical attacks.

Hakija had complained about the lack of international support for Sućeska tent encampment. Eleonor explained that in fact, international organizations are helping with hundreds of reconstruction projects in the Zvornik area (over 6,000 people are involved in return there), and that the UNHCR is strapped for resources. But the UNHCR is prepared to supply tools for clearing rubble from destroyed houses, as well as farming and reconstruction tools. Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and UNHCR are both preparing to rebuild houses in Sućeska. If funding is made available from the European Union, this will affect 25 houses.

I asked what happens if thousands return, rather than dozens or hundreds. Eleonor said, 'This won't be so hard. It will happen the way it is happening in Zvornik, without big publicity and without big animosity. It is a big problem when some activists stir up publicity and announce returns in advance -- then the international community has to put a brake on returns, for security reasons. But lack of resources is the biggest problem.'

Meanwhile, Hakija's meeting with the High Representative Petritsch had proved successful. Hakija came out looking upbeat. He had complained to Petritsch, as he had promised, about problems with obstruction. Petritsch made promises to help the Sućeska resettlement project. Hakija told me, 'Petritsch said that this settlement is the biggest move toward the reunification of Bosnia.'

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We headed off toward Sućeska. As we left Srebrenica, Zulfo pointed out the house he had lived in before the war. He said that the Serb who lives there, a man from Vogošća, won't let him come into the house.

The road to Sućeska fitted my idea of a remote backwoods Appalachian route. Forty-five minutes of dusty, ill-maintained dirt road with switchbacks, no railings above sheer drop-offs, and plenty of ruts. Beautiful scenery compensated for the hard driving.

We climbed further into the mountains, passing forests, spying ridges ever further in the distance. This is an isolated area, with few villages along the way and not many war-ruined houses. It was classic Bosnia, with tight green hills all the way to the horizon. One could almost forget the horrors that had happened here.

As we rode, Hakija told me that the people of Sućeska were renowned for their strength and good health, because of the good water, the air, and the natural food that they eat there. 'In

Sućeska, they don't need Viagra,' he noted.

We arrived at Sućeska, dropping down from one last ridge to a high plateau. Passing a ruined community center building, we came to a clearing where ten white tents stood, each large enough to sleep five or ten people. In front of the tents there was a rustic common kitchen, built recently from rough posts and beams, with a long table that could seat 25-odd people. It was mid-day in the middle of the hottest heat wave in 50 years, and a half-dozen men were lounging around the table. On the road by the kitchen, a couple of trucks were unloading some rafter beams, donated by the Tuzla Canton government, to be used for repair of the houses.

On Hakija's arrival, the men perked up and listened to his report of the meeting with Petritsch. In contrast to my meeting with him and Vesna the previous day, Hakija was enthusiastic. His conversation with the Sućeska returnees resembled a pep talk.

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I spoke with Abid Salihović, a relative of Zulfo and coordinator of the camp's activities. He had grown up in Brakovci, one of Sućeska's villages 15 minutes' walk from the center, and lived there until the fall of Srebrenica in 1995. He told me, 'We feel safe here now. There are Serbs who come here, and we talk to them. There is a Serb construction firm from Banja Luka working on the community center, and they sleep here without any problem.' Hakija added, 'We can live together with the Serbs without problems, when the politicians don't get involved.'

'It would be better if there were a multi-ethnic police force,' Abid continued. 'There are 12 Bosniaks (Muslims) now being trained in Banja Luka, and they should be on the force by October.' All police who work in the Republika Srpska must go through a six-month training program in Banja Luka. Zulfo added that he had applied to become a police officer.

After the fall of Srebrenica, Abid lived with his wife and three children in Zenica. He had no work there. He received some oil and flour from a relief organization, but no money. Now he is in the process of clearing rubble from his house and preparing it for reconstruction. Abid told me that almost 800 people from Sućeska, mostly men, had been killed during the fall of Srebrenica. The resulting low proportion of able-bodied men now makes reconstruction difficult without international help.

Abid asked me, 'Have you ever seen such a bad road? It was built more than a hundred years ago by the Austrians, who came here to develop the silver and bauxite mines. This is the only complex of villages in the municipality whose main road was never paved. If the roads were better, we would do well with a factory here. We could grow fruit and raise cattle and sell them in town. The road needs to be asphalted.'

Zulfo told me, 'We tried for a year and a half to return directly to the city of Srebrenica, but our efforts were always blocked. Now we are here, and we must work on establishing return settlements closer to the city. If this doesn't succeed, all our efforts will fall through.'

'We are very disappointed with the small amount of help we have received from the international

community. And the Republika Srpska has said that they have no money for reconstruction. But their budget declaration from the last session shows that they spent 360,000 DM on flowers! This was from their quarterly budget, not the annual one. When I read that, I wanted to faint.'

I replied, 'At least they had good taste.'

Zulfo replied: 'No, those were artificial flowers. I'm going to propose that we build an artificial flower factory here, and I'll deliver those gladiolas and roses to Banja Luka myself.'

People were snacking as we talked. Hakija cut up an onion and dipped a chunk of it directly into a box of salt -- a cuisine I'd not witnessed before. He then ate it with a piece of bread and liver pate. He resumed his pep talk: 'It's up to us to show the world that we are serious about return. There are plenty of people who doubt us.' 'F... those who doubt us,' someone interjected. Another: 'We have already shown that we are serious.'

An old man complained to Hakija, 'I lost my whole family; I'm alone here. How can I take care of myself?'

Hakija said, 'And I lost two brothers and my father. You're not alone here. We are all in this together.'

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Returnee Ahmet Mehmedović showed me his house, a couple hundred meters down the road toward a communal water spigot. On the way, he pulled a few bottles of beer (Tuzlansko Pivo) out of the trunk of his car, wiped them off, and placed them in the well to cool. Behind the well stood the ruins of the village's mosque.

Ahmet had worked for 10 years in the bauxite mines before the war, and he built his own house. Since the fall of Srebrenica he had lived in Lukavac, near Tuzla, with his wife and children. He said, 'Every night when I go to sleep, I'm thinking about how I'm going to get ten DM the next day to feed my family. There is no life for us there. Here, maybe. But my wife and children don't want to come back here. They want to go to America, where we have relatives. My youngest son was in third grade when all that happened in Potočari. He remembers everything.'

I asked Ahmet, 'Maybe if your wife and kids came back here and saw how things are being rebuilt, they would become enthusiastic?' He made eating motions with his hands. 'There's nothing to eat,' he said.

A couple of men were working on Ahmet's house. Gaping holes in the cinderblock walls, caused by mortar strikes, were being filled in with bricks. The windows had been replaced. A large pile of rafter beams and roof tiles lay in the front yard. We sat in the shade drinking the chilled Tuzla beer. Zulfo and others discussed whether drinking beer was a sin.

From this hill you could see several green ridges out to the horizon. Ruined villages were barely visible here and there, their gray houses standing roofless. Zulfo pointed out a Serb village a few

kilometers away, its red-tile roofs standing out against the green. 'Above that village they fired mortars at us. That's when they wrecked the mosque. They really f...d us.' A helicopter flew westward in the distance. 'There goes Petritsch, back to Sarajevo,' said Zulfo.

Walking back from Ahmet's house, I asked him whether he talks to the Serbs who are there working on the reconstruction. He said, 'Why not? They are not responsible for what happened to us. If I were in the United States, I would talk to Serbs. I would talk to Croats, and I would talk to Jews. I have to be civilized.' We came up to where the Banja Luka company was fixing the community center. I asked some of the young workers where they were from. One of them told me they were from Leskovac in central Serbia. He and his friends were obviously happy to have work and to be out of Serbia. One worker asked Ahmet about a place to wash, and Ahmet walked down the road with him to show him where there was water.

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I jumped into the truck with Hakija and a few others, and we set off to inspect the house-cleaning projects in a few nearby villages. We drove a half-hour down hot, dusty, Austro-Hungarian roads, coming to a ridge where I had noticed smoke rising all afternoon. Folks had been burning garbage from the wreckage by their houses, but the fire got out of hand and was spreading across acres of grassy fields. We drove by those fields, the fire snapping and crackling, filling the atmosphere with smoke.

We stopped at a few houses where people were clearing rubble. The people there had walked two hours from the main encampment to work on their houses. A man told me, 'This village is named 'Žedansko,' from the word for thirsty. When it was first settled, there was no water here. Later, we got water. So we have to change the name.' Hakija inspected the houses to see their state of preparation for reconstruction. There were a few ancient farmhouses with wood shingles, that Serb forces had not bothered to torch.

The workers -- men and women -- piled into the back of the truck and we drove back to the main camp. Soon after, Hakija, Zulfo, and I headed back to Tuzla. As we passed Nova Kasaba and drove toward Zvornik, they showed me the woods they had walked through five years earlier to get to safety. 'There was a camp where they killed people,' said Zulfo. 'Here there used to be a mosque,' he added. 'There were bodies in that river, there.'

Postscript

Is the Sućeska initiative a breakthrough -- the beginning of the end for hard-line opposition to returns? Or is it a futile gesture that is doomed to perish in the cold, implacable nationalism of Bosnia's Serbs?

It is hard to tell from the refugees themselves. They are putting their heart and soul into reclaiming their homes. But at the same time that Ahmet Mehmedović was repairing the roof on his house, he was eagerly asking me about the chances of getting a visa to the United States.

One thing is clear: the success of Sućeska will be heavily influenced by factors that are largely

outside the control of the refugees. Three factors in particular stand out.

First, there is the politics. The government of the Canton of Tuzla has been one of the most consistent supporters of the resettlement projects. But there remains hostility between the activists of Srebrenica 99 and the Muslim faction on Srebrenica's municipal council that claims to represent them.

In late August, leading members of the Tuzla Canton government organized a visit to areas of return in eastern Bosnia. The purpose of the tour was to collect information regarding the returnees' needs and problems. But Nesib Mandžić, the mayor of Srebrenica, shrilly criticized the visitors for not having arranged their tour through his office.

'We are wondering if the government...of Tuzla Canton is ready to support us? I openly want to say that none of them is interested in Srebrenica. This refers not only to the Tuzla Canton, but also to the BH Federation and the state leadership. They only remember Srebrenica on the anniversary of the genocide.' (Quoted in the daily 'Dnevni Avaz,' August 19, 2000)

Spokesmen for the Tuzla Canton said that their visit was not meant to undermine the legitimacy of the Srebrenica authorities. After the controversial tour, Canton officials reported that 'the reconstruction of destroyed facilities is going slowly, that the returnees are lacking food and construction material, and that there is no freedom of movement in some areas.' ('Dnevni Avaz,' August 22, 2000)

Caught in the middle, one Sućeska returnee said that he no longer wished the politicians to advocate for him. 'If you can't make return possible for us, then it's time for you to leave office.' ('Oslobodjenje,' August 5, 2000)

I asked Eleonor from the UHCHR why mayor Mandžić was so opposed to the Sućeska settlement. Her view was that the SDA (Muslim nationalist party of which Mandžić is a member) was exaggerating security concerns to discourage return. This was consistent with what Hakija had told me. However, Eleonor added, the SDA is changing its strategy, because ordinary displaced people are seeing that the security situation is not so bad and are clamoring to go home.

The second big question mark concerns international support. UNHCR has been the most generous supporter of the tent encampment thus far. UNHCR has been shopping around among international agencies for reconstruction donations and has provided 'Quick Impact' grants for reconstruction material, tents, and stoves. (The new Potočari returnees are now sleeping in tents that were until recently used in Sućeska.) But UNHCR admits that it can barely keep up with the many demands for its aid.

U.S. Ambassador to Bosnia Thomas Miller has been expressing support for return to Srebrenica. Early in August, Ambassador Miller visited Sućeska and announced that the United States will fund the reconstruction of 20 houses in that community through a Catholic Relief Services project. The United States also decided to increase aid for Bosnian refugee returns, from \$67 to \$75 million for this year.

Ambassador Miller has even promised to support reconstruction in the face of obstruction. '(Those) who are trying to burn down houses in Srebrenica ... will not be allowed to continue that kind of obstructionism.' But he did not specify how the arsons would be prevented.

For many, this is not enough. Vina Lubura, a staff member of the OHR who works in Srebrenica, told me that she was optimistic about two-way return this year: 'Now we have the right laws, a system. The political establishment of Srebrenica is ready to allow return. We have a multi-ethnic government here.'

The laws may be in place, but stronger measures are surely needed. Elsewhere in Bosnia, local officials have begun to identify and evict double occupants, in order to free up property for would-be returnees. But in Srebrenica town, only three families have returned. International officials must step up the pressure to solve the housing problem and improve the security question.

Against this background, the refugees are awaiting winter with apprehension. Abid Salihović, manager of the Sućeska camp, was quoted as saying: 'We do not have the means to repair our homes unless the international community helps us. If our authorities or the international community do not help us, we will ask for collective visas to leave this country.' (Tuzla Canton Radio-TV June 22, 2000).

How real is this? By the end of 1999, at least 5,000 displaced Srebrenicans had left the country. But it is not so easy to obtain an American immigration visa, and activists have not yet given up on Srebrenica.

Much will depend on the relationship between the refugees and the international community in the months to come. The refugees are prepared to take the initiative. But they cannot succeed without money and protection, which can only come from the outside.

If the OHR, which represents the international community in Bosnia, can provide the right support for the tent people of Sućeska, Srebrenica's fearsome reputation as a bastion of intolerance and hatred will finally crumble.

Glossary/Who's Who

BOSNIAK: Bosnian Muslim.

ABID SALIHOVIĆ: Displaced Srebrenican activist for return to Sućeska, camp coordinator.

AHMET MEHMEDOVIĆ: Displaced Srebrenican activist for return to Sućeska.

ALIJA IZETBEGOVIĆ: Wartime president of Republic of Bosnia, Muslim president of SDA.

CRS: Catholic Relief Services, international humanitarian agency involved in reconstruction around Srebrenica.

ELEONOR GORDON: UNHCR staff member who works out of Zvornik.

HAKIJA MEHOLJIĆ: War-time police chief of Srebrenica; leader of Srebrenica 99.

IBRAHIM HODŽIĆ: Displaced Srebrenican currently living in Tuzla, employee of the Srebrenican government.

NESIB MANDŽIĆ: Muslim mayor of Srebrenica.

OHR: Office of the High Representative; Dayton-created institution representing the international community in Bosnia.

SDA: Party of Democratic Action; Muslim nationalist party headed by Alija Izetbegović.

SDP: Social Democratic Party; Bosnia's leading non-nationalist political party, with members from all three ethnicities.

SDS: Serb Democratic Party; Serb nationalist party that was the political leadership during the war, still entrenched in many parts of Republika Srpska.

Srebrenica 99: Tuzla-based multi-ethnic organization advocating return to Srebrenica and reconciliation.

THOMAS MILLER: U.S. Ambassador to Bosnia.

TUZLA CITIZENS FORUM: along with Srebrenica 99, has organized low-profile encounters between displaced Srebrenicans and their former Serb neighbors.

UNHCR: U.N. High Commission for Refugees; agency responsible for taking care of refugees.

VESNA MUSTAFIĆ: Displaced Srebrenican, Serb married to a Muslim, now Tuzla-based return activist, member of Srebrenica 99.

WOLFGANG PETRITSCH: International Community's High Representative to Bosnia.

WOMEN OF SREBRENICA (Žene Srebrenice): Srebrenica survivor advocacy organization based in Tuzla.

ZULFO SALIHOVIĆ: Displaced Srebrenican activist for return to Sućeska.

SOURCES

'Dnevni Avaz': Independent Sarajevo daily with Muslim nationalist leanings.

ICG: International Crisis Group.

'Oslobodjenje': Independent Sarajevo daily newspaper.

'Povratak' ('Return'): Non-nationalist quarterly publication produced in both entities of Bosnia, advocating return of displaced persons and refugees.

Tuzla Canton Radio-TV

CONTACTS

Srebrenica 99

tel: 387 31 251 253

Women of Srebrenica (Žene Srebrenice)

e-mail: office@srebrenica.org

Web site: www.srebrenica.org

tel: 387 35 251 498

Filipa Kljajica 38

75000 Tuzla, Bosnia

Catholic Relief Services (CRS):

e-mail: crsbhsa@bih.net.ba

tel: 387 33 205 827

M. Kantardzica 3/IV

71000 Sarajevo, Bosnia

OHR <http://www.ohr.int>

UNHCR: e-mail: prljacam@unhcr.ch

Web Site: <http://www.unhcr.ba/>