



On the Record: Returning Refugees to Bosnia

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**RETURN TO SOUTHEAST BOSNIA, GORAŽDE AND KOPACI
Division and Obstruction on the Drina**

Contents:

- **From the Editorial Desk**
- **Two Towns Divided**
 - **Goražde**
 - **Kopači**
- **The Advocacy Corner**
 - **The Regional Committee for Refugees of Southeast Bosnia**

From the AP Editorial Desk

For tens of thousands of Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), southeast Bosnia is the heart of darkness. Here, in 1992, Muslims were rounded up, beaten, separated from their families, imprisoned, and expelled. For the last eight years, towns like Foča and Višegrad have provided a haven for indicted war criminals and embittered Serb refugees.

Returns to this area have been almost completely stalled. While several thousand Muslims returned to the northeastern RS last year, only 41 returned home to the entire region around Goražde. Three of the 22 obstructionist local officials who were removed from office in November last year -- they included one Muslim-- were from the region. One was even head of the local Serb municipal office for refugees.

How can the logjam be broken? In this issue, PETER LIPPMAN explains the regional context. At the center is the town of Goražde, which was the only Muslim-controlled municipality in southeastern Bosnia that did not fall to the Serbs in the war. Thousands of Muslim refugees sought shelter in Goražde during the siege. Today, they are waiting to go home to towns and villages throughout the region: Višegrad, Rudo, Čajniče, Rogatica, Sokolac, Foča, Pale and Kopači.

On the other side, in the Serb Republic, are Serbs waiting to return to their homes in what is now the Federation -- towns like Sarajevo, Jajce, Bosansko Grahovo -- and of course Goražde.

Out of this Chinese puzzle, Peter has chosen two towns -- Goražde and Kopači. Before the war, Kopači was a suburb of Goražde. Now it lies in a different entity, separated by the Inter-Entity Boundary Line (IEBL) that was created at Dayton. The IEBL represents a formidable physical and psychological barrier for refugees on both sides. Until it is breached, there will be no return home.

Goražde

'Do you see that house in the field over there? That's my house. It's right on the inter-entity borderline. If I were allowed to re-enter my house, I'd be cooking dinner in the Republika Srpska and sleeping in the Federation.'

This comment, by a former inhabitant of Kopači, illustrated the maddening challenge that faces many displaced Bosnians.

Kopači is a former suburb of Goražde, the large town that straddles the river Drina in eastern Bosnia. During the war, Goražde was one of several 'safe areas' (along with Srebrenica and Žepa) that the U.N. Protective Forces (UNPROFOR) were assigned to protect. Žepa and Srebrenica, notorious for the massacre of over 8,000 people, fell in the summer of 1995. Goražde was the only 'safe area' in eastern Bosnia that was not ultimately taken over by Serb forces.

As other towns and villages in the region were overrun, refugees fled to Goražde. Villages around Goražde that fell to the Serbs, like Kopači, were incorporated into a new municipality in the Republika Srpska, termed 'Srpsko Goražde.'

At the height of the war 65,000 people were packed into Goražde. Today that population has shrunk by a third. At the same time, approximately 70,000 displaced Bosnians are waiting to return to the surrounding municipalities.

Vahid Kanlić and Ahmo Živojević are both activists for return who now live in Goražde. The two men described to me their wartime experience.

Mr. Kanlić told me, 'I was a social worker before the war. I owned a house in Kopači, and 15 hectares of land. There were approximately 2,000 Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) in Kopači before the war, and only two Serb families. One of the Serb families stayed until Kopači fell to the Serbs, and we protected them. Kopači was not separated from Goražde until April of 1994, when there was a heavy offensive with 40,000 Serb, Montenegrin, and JNA (Yugoslav National Army) soldiers attacking. All males over 15 years of age were on the front line.'

'When Kopači and the rest of the outskirts of Goražde fell, my family and I fled to Goražde. At that time I became responsible for 'civilian matters' in Goražde, for the rest of the war. There was chaos in Goražde then. There were dead and bleeding people and animals in the streets, their blood running together. It can't be described. People were killed by bombs and snipers.' (He pointed through a window in his office at two houses on a nearby hill formerly occupied by snipers.)'

'There were around 65,000 people in Goražde then,' he continued. 'What happened in Srebrenica did not happen here, because of our resistance. We protected Goražde ourselves. There were only four UNPROFOR personnel, and they stayed in the basements.'

'It was very difficult to do social work here during the war. The old center for social work was bombed, and it burned down. All the documentation was gone. I had to start from scratch.'

Ahmo Živojević continued, 'A tank destroyed my house in Kopači, while my whole family was in it. My children and I were safe in the basement, but my wife was upstairs. She did not survive.'

'Before the war, I was a shoemaker and I had two shops in Kopači. One was destroyed, and the other is now a bakery. I don't know what happened to my equipment; it is gone. I have gone to visit the bakery a few times, without any problem. I want to fix my house -- I am waiting for permission from the government of the Republika Srpska to do that.'

'During the war, I was displaced to Goražde. During that time, salt cost 100 DM (\$60) a liter, flour 25 DM, and cooking oil 50 DM. A box -- not a carton -- of cigarettes was 120 DM, or you could trade an ox. People smoked leaves, whatever we could burn. Later some people managed to plant tobacco, toward the end of the war. Then they could sell a kilo of it for 1,000 DM.'

'Later food was parachuted in, but randomly, so some people would have it, and others none. Eventually a sharing system was set up. We used rice for everything: soup, bread, flour, and pita bread. No one eats rice now, if they can help it.'

'There was no electricity during the war, so we would find a little used motor oil, and burn it with a rag for a wick. There was also no running water, but there were springs. People would wait at the springs for four or five hours for water. But the Serbs knew where the springs were and would bomb them. A lot of people died that way.'

'There were no surgeons in Goražde for the first year of the war, although a couple came in May 1993. The siege around the town then became complete, and so the doctors stayed with us until the end of the war. Those doctors did for this town what even God didn't do.'

'Goražde is a dead end,' Mr. Kanlić told me. 'There is hardly any work. People are leaving here, and they never return.'

The level of industrial production in Goražde before the war was higher than the rest of Bosnia. Today, industrial activity is almost nonexistent. The city is surrounded by the Republika Srpska. It is connected to the rest of the Federation by an access road, as stipulated by the Dayton agreement. But most traffic to Goražde from the Federation passes through the Republika Srpska because the road is so poor.

Goražde has been called the 'city of heroes' for its steadfastness during the war, yet it has all but vanished from the public eye. Hidden away to the east and surrounded by the Serb entity, it seems all but forgotten by the Bosnian government in Sarajevo. The city is pleasantly located on

the river and under better circumstances it could attract tourists. But the atmosphere is one of depression. Young people loiter on the streets, thinking about how to leave.

This is happening throughout Bosnia. Many of those young people are displaced. If they were able to return to their pre-war homes they would find it easier to find a job, and the depression would lift. But local administrators oppose the return, and the international community has not pushed hard enough. So the economy continues to stagnate while fertile fields outside of the town lie fallow, and displaced people struggle for food. Poverty and displacement go hand in hand.

Kopači

Many of the skilled and talented people who now live in Goražde are former residents of Kopači, only a few kilometers from the center of town. Kopači was important to Goražde before the war, as it was the location of four factories. Kopači's residents, overwhelmingly Muslim, were well educated and prosperous. Now, Kopači has been made the seat of the new municipality of Srpsko (Serb) Goražde, and it is filled with displaced Serbs from many other parts of Bosnia. Former Kopači residents who have tried to reclaim their homes in the postwar period have met with violence.

Himzo Bajramović, president of the Association for Return to Srpsko Goražde, described the situation to me: 'Kopači is four kilometers from here -- we can see our houses, but we can't return. There were 3,668 Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims) living in that part of the municipality in 1991, and 674 Serbs. Ninety percent of those Bosniaks are now in Goražde. We can't return to our houses because the Serb government won't allow us to.'

'Most of the government institutions -- the post office, the Red Cross -- are in private houses, because that's almost all that there is. The government settled displaced Serbs in Kopači, but they are residing in private property, which should be untouchable. They say that their people do not have places to go. There are now 300 houses in Kopači -- around 1,200 were destroyed. The Mayor of Serb Goražde says that the population of displaced Serbs there is 7,000. But we have counted the number of houses and families in Kopači, and there isn't room for that many people.'

In March 1999, together with a Sarajevo journalist, I made an unscheduled visit to the mayor of Srpsko Goražde, Slavko Topalović, at his office in Kopači. The mayor was visibly uncomfortable at seeing us in his office. (Vahid Kanlić later told me that we would never have been able to arrange such a meeting in advance.)

Topalović's small office was decorated with a picture of St. George and the Dragon, a framed kokarda (Serbian nationalist symbol), and a portrait of Nikola Poplašen, president of the Republika Srpska (removed from office the day after my visit).

Topalović told me that he felt sorry for all the citizens of Goražde. Dayton should be observed, he said, but in Kopači there were 350 families of displaced Serbs living in Muslims' houses on the right bank of the Drina alone. Where could they go?

Mayor Topalović was one of the three local officials later removed by the OHR for obstruction.

It is not hard to understand why the activists decided to make Kopači the focal point for their strategy to return last year. As Lisa D'Onofrio of the UNHCR's Goražde office explained to me, 'Kopači is the key to the region, because there can be a high degree of return in both directions on this axis.' Kopači would be relatively easy to sustain, as people who return there could support themselves by working in nearby Goražde and in the factories in Kopači itself.

The return activists of Goražde believe that once Kopači is resettled, it can serve as a logistical point of departure and support for return to Višegrad, Rogatica, Rudo, and other locations further afield in southeast Bosnia.

All this makes Kopači much more important to activists, for the time being, than other neighboring towns. One refugee from Čajniče told me, 'There are officials in the Serb-controlled part of this region who want to cooperate, but they lack resources. For example, the Čajniče mayor is a good person and he is supporting everything that we are trying to do. The town of Rudo is more difficult. The mayor there is an educated young man, born in Rudo. He has invited people to return. But Rudo is at the end of the road, near the corner of land where Bosnia, Serbia, and Montenegro all meet. Also, the Army of the Republika Srpska has a base there, so people are afraid to return. People fear to return to all the areas of southeast Bosnia that are controlled by the RS. This is why Kopači is the key to return to all of the towns around the region.'

Himzo Bajramović noted that Kopači has clinics and an industrial center. 'When people know that we have returned to Kopači, they will be encouraged to go to their homes farther away.'

This helps to explain why the Regional Committee for Refugees of Southeast Bosnia views Kopači as the 'key to southeast Bosnia.' In mid-1999 the organization began to call upon international officials to facilitate return to the town. At the same time, displaced residents of Kopači started planning spontaneous returns. Some families began tilling their old fields. During the summer, return activists made arrangements with several international relief organizations to start rebuilding 70 damaged houses in Kopači.

The Advocacy Corner

The Regional Committee for Refugees of Southeast Bosnia

The Regional Committee for Refugees of Southeast Bosnia, formed in January 1999, acts as an umbrella organization for local associations of displaced persons from Foča, Višegrad, Rudo, Rogatica, Čajniče, Pale, Sokolac, and Srpsko Goražde.

Based in Goražde, the organization works for the return of Muslims who were displaced from the surrounding towns. It also advocates for the return of displaced Serbs to Goražde. Vahid Kanlić, the president of the organization, estimates that it speaks for around 100,000 people.

In early March 1999, the Committee held a regional conference in Goražde, attended by several hundred displaced persons and return activists. It is significant that participants in this conference

included displaced Serbs living in Višegrad and several other municipalities -- people who were for the first time starting to organize themselves and press for their right to return to Goražde.

At the conference, activist Mirhunisa Komarica called for the return of displaced persons in all directions. She pointed out that there had been many meetings, but that none had led to return. The international community's plan for 1999 was to return 120,000 people to their homes. Ms. Komarica mentioned that there are that many refugees in the United States alone.

Fadil Banjanović, a charismatic return activist based in Tuzla, said, 'We are in a deep sleep. It is time to wake up. It is we who will make return happen, not the international community. We are all for return, but for three years, nothing has happened. Something is wrong, either with the international community or with us, or both.'

I spoke with Mujo Pestek, President of the Goražde Municipal Council, who told me, 'The politicians keep things the way they are. Also, some displaced persons are holding things back, people who came out ahead in the war. We need freedom of movement. The best thing would be if the international community would set up municipal information centers and guarantee security for returnees, and then take care of the local authorities who are obstructing return.'

Vahid Kanlić explained his organization's work to me: 'We have clear plans based on two-way return. The prerequisites are the establishment of multi-ethnic police forces and local governments, and an increased SFOR (NATO's stabilization force in Bosnia) for presence to provide security. Before the creation of this committee, there were no contacts between Serbs and Bosniaks. But now we have established communication with people in Višegrad, Rudo, Rogatica, and several other places. We have a mutual language of displacement; we think the same way.'

'Our organization helps people fill out property claim forms so that they can return. Many people have filled out these forms, some as many as five times. We work with the UNHCR, the IPTF (U.N. police), and we put pressure on the Republika Srpska and the international community. Hundreds of families have submitted applications to return. Now, we have to do this all over because of new property laws in the RS. We are focusing on Kopači because it is closer to here, easier to sustain, and some of the people who would move back there work here in Goražde.'

'Thirty Serb families have returned to Goražde in the last year. Before the war, the total population of Goražde was 37,000, with around 30 percent (11,000) of that being Serb. Now there are applications from over 1,000 more Serb families to return.'

Mr. Kanlić complained bitterly to me about the fact that the international community, and especially the Office of the High Representative (OHR), seemed to be ignoring eastern Bosnia. 'It is the black hole of return, the nest of war criminals. In other parts of the Republika Srpska, things are moving. What is the OHR doing about this situation? If this were Stolac, Drvar, and so on, there would have been big changes by now. Who has been fired?' Later in the year, it would seem that the international community had heard his plea.