

On the Record: Refugee Returns to Srebrenica

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Drina

The mission of Drina, founded in 1996, has been to assist people displaced from eastern Bosnia - particularly the Podrinje area, along the Drina River that forms part of the border with Serbia. When displaced Muslims began returning to villages around Srebrenica in 2000, Drina provided essential support. Today, it is the lead NGO working in the villages.

At the same time, Drina offers a wide range of other programs from its offices in Tuzla and Srebrenica, where it works to strengthen the role of NGOs and encourage interethnic trust. All of this fits into the larger goal of rebuilding a healthy society in Srebrenica municipality.

Ilijaz Pilav, the president of Drina, likes to stress the importance of "sustainable return." He notes that some refugees and displaced from Srebrenica have returned only to find that life is so difficult that they leave again, seeking visas to resettle abroad. Srebrenica is the poorest municipality in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and to date has the lowest rate of refugee return. The challenge is not just to help people come home, but stay home.

Drina's programs include classes in English, accounting, and computer literacy. Their goal is to help make people more employable in preparation for an eventual return to their pre-war homes. With funding from the Dutch relief agency Cordaid, Drina also provides scholarships for dozens of displaced children from Srebrenica. Many of these children are orphans or missing a parent. Most are gifted students -- the rest are developmentally disabled. The organization has also recognized the need to educate displaced Serbs living in Srebrenica on property laws in the Federation, so that they can better navigate the complexities of return to that entity.

Towards the end of 2002, Drina received funds from the UNDP to implement an assistance program for elderly inhabitants of Srebrenica, regardless of ethnicity. This program engages volunteers to spend time regularly with 100 of the elderly who are poor or immobile. The volunteers bring packages of food, prepare firewood, perform other necessary tasks, and monitor the needs of the beneficiaries.

Like many of the NGOs that make up the Forum, Drina places a heavy emphasis on collecting and disseminating information. At present there is no reliable database of return figures; Drina is working to compile statistics. The organization is also operating a computer training/internet center in Litve, at a displaced persons' center outside of Tuzla.

Drina provides legal advice for hundreds of people each year from its office in Tuzla. The organization also publishes a bi-monthly newsletter in the Bosnian language, for the benefit of displaced persons. The newsletter features regular updates on property law, and has provided a step-by-step description of the process returnees must go through to reclaim their pre-war property and go home.

In the first issue of the newsletter, Drina's staff promised to visit the home of every returnee, no matter how remote the location. Subsequent issues have included announcements about seminars, assistance programs, targets for return to Zvornik, the construction of mosques, and the repair houses. The newsletter also features a section with questions from readers.

An important focus of Drina's work is in the villages around Srebrenica, where volunteers and staff make weekly visits. There were about 230 villages in the pre-war Srebrenica municipality, and by late 2002 people had returned to at least 30 of them. Many of the residents are living in tents and parts of houses that have not been completely destroyed. Roads have not been maintained for ten years, and some of them were already in poor shape before the war. Estimates for house repair in the newly resettled villages of Osmače run to \$15,000 each, and the cost of a new gravel road would be around \$50,000.

Drina is now focusing on the long-term sustainability of return. Most of the factories that once

gave Srebrenica a thriving economy are plundered and rusting, and few stand a chance of being revived. Perhaps some of the mines will be restarted, if investors can be found.



These returnees to Osmače village were assisted by Drina

The best prospects for earning a living appear to be in agriculture. The commercial possibilities would be excellent if the farmers were able to produce more and had access to markets.

One example is organic food, which is in demand in Western Europe: no pesticides or chemical fertilizers have been used in the Srebrenica region for ten years or more. With the help of Cordaid, Drina currently supports an agro-business development program, providing training to help returned farmers choose appropriate crops and market their produce. Drina also provides farmers with building materials and agricultural equipment such as small and medium-sized land tillers.



Muslims who have returned to the villages around Srebrenica do not qualify for free health care in the town and with assistance from Cordaid, Drina has initiated a program of weekly Medical visits to the villages. Suceska's clinic has been rebuilt, and a Medical technician has been hired to staff that location. Together with the Srebrenica Forum of NGOs, Drina is advocating a nation-wide package of standardized health coverage laws, so that minority returnees will not have to fend for themselves.

Left: Zulfo Salihović among the tents of Suceska village, 2000. Drina now leads efforts to support the villages.

Srebrenica 99



Mira Pavić Grujičić from Srebrenica 99 and young beneficiaries

In 1999 displaced Srebrenican activists based in Tuzla founded Srebrenica 99, an organization determined to make return happen. Within a year, the group had succeeded in spearheading the first returns to the village of Suceska (see page 8).

Srebrenica 99 opened an office in the center of Srebrenica in 2001 and began to initiate programs in the city that would help make life easier for returnees and displaced residents of Srebrenica alike.

Srebrenica 99 makes a point of making contact with all returnees, visiting them and offering moral support and information about their programs. At present, these programs focus primarily on children aged seven to fifteen. They include computer and art classes, as well as English lessons taught by Dutch volunteers from the organization "Werkgroep Nederland." In 2002 over 300 children completed computer courses.



Wired to succeed: children use the computers at the Srebrenica 99 offices.

Approximately 30 children visit Srebrenica 99's center each day. Most of the children attending the classes are displaced Serbs, because this is the predominant population of Srebrenica. But classes for returnee children from Suceska and other villages are held on the weekends. Staff members of the organization look forward to the day when the Forum of Srebrenica NGOs will open a joint space for all its member organizations, as this will also mean that

children have a place to meet.



Srebrenica 99 also continues its cross-entity camp programs for children, bringing kids to Srebrenica from Tuzla, and from Srebrenica to Gracanica. Children who have made these trips are eager to go again.

Self expression: children at the Srebrenica 99 offices.

Looking to the future, staff member Vesna Mustafić hopes that Srebrenica 99 will be able to initiate programs with older returnees, if funding permits. She notes that they need regular visits and help in purchasing their Medicines. Some of the elderly do not have pensions, and need food and group activities.

Bosfam

To a large extent, it was women who gave rise to grassroots activism in Bosnia during the war. The Tuzla-based organization Bosfam was one of their most successful, and best-known, initiatives.

Bosfam was started in 1994 by displaced women from eastern Bosnia who came together to help each other through the crisis. Many had left Srebrenica in the early years of the war, before the massacre, so they were well placed to help the thousands of traumatized women who arrived from Srebrenica in the summer of 1995.

Bosfam's director Munira Beba Hadžić was a mathematics teacher in Srebrenica before the war. She served as principal of the elementary school in Srebrenica for twelve years before she decided to leave in 1992, early in the war. Referring to the early days as a displaced person, she said, "Many of us were lost, and had nothing. So some of us got together and asked what we could do by ourselves. We began to go around to the collective centers. If nothing else, we could at least talk to people. As it turned out, we could do much more."



Beba and her friends began to seek information about the location of their relatives. Some were in Croatia, some in Serbia. Some had been taken prisoner; and some had already been killed.

Clothes of reconciliation: The women of Bosfam, victims of the 1995 massacre, knitted these sweaters for displaced children in Srebrenica.

In 1993, Beba started working with the international relief agency Oxfam. "We wanted to do something for the displaced women, who were just sitting around," she recalled. "When you sit, you can knit." They started a pilot project in three schools that had been turned into collective centers in Tuzla. Oxfam supplied the wool and the women knitted sweaters and hats while the bombs were falling. The knitted products were then donated to needy families. It was so cathartic that Oxfam helped open a center near the refugee camps.

Center for Legal Assistance

Srpko Đurić is well qualified to help the displaced Serbs in Srebrenica sort out their complicated return problems, because he is a displaced person himself. An attorney from Sarajevo, Mr. Đurić lived in Zvornik after the war, and was hired by Mercy Corps Scotland in 1998 when the international organization opened the Center for Legal Assistance in Srebrenica. As of the beginning of 2003, sponsorship of the Center has been taken over by the International Rescue Committee.

The Center for Legal Assistance is one branch of a Bosnia-wide legal aid network supported by the UNHCR. This network of Legal Aid and Information Centers (LAICs) provides free help to all displaced people in need of legal assistance. Much of Đurić's work consists of advising returnees how to reclaim their pre-war property, whether it is in Srebrenica or in the Croat-Muslim Federation.

Each day between 20 and 30 people come to his office for consultation on the thorny problems of property law and obstruction. "I leave work each day drunk from fatigue," he said with a resigned expression.

Serbs still find it difficult to return home to some areas of the Federation. The main problem in the Sarajevo Canton is obstruction from local governments which do not want to see Serb properties freed up. Meanwhile, in Srebrenica many refurbished Muslim-owned homes are sitting empty, because the owners have not returned.



Recreation among the ruins: the Center for Legal Assistance is one of several Forum members trying to provide better services for children.

This is partly due to the fact that the reconstruction of homes in Srebrenica has pulled ahead of the economy. In some cases displaced Muslims are discouraged from coming home, because they lack the means to support themselves. Mr. Đurić described a recent visit to Dobož, in the Muslim-controlled Federation. There, many displaced Srebrenicans are living in a collective center. He noted that the center was providing them with support that they would not receive in Srebrenica.

The situation is often the same for Serbs who were displaced from the Federation. Mr. Đurić is one example -- he owns a

house in a Sarajevo suburb, but has no job there. He feels that his two children, who are living overseas, would return to Bosnia immediately if they could find employment

The Center for Legal Assistance is a multi-ethnic organization. In addition to providing legal counseling, it is helping to repair many homes in the Srebrenica area. The organization also collaborates with the Forum of Srebrenica NGOs in collecting information about the needs of returnees for home reconstruction.

Amica

Srebrenica was still closed off to the rest of the world when Amica opened a branch office in the town. It was both the first NGO and the first ethnically mixed organization to start working in the town, and the atmosphere was far from friendly.



Vjekoslava Perković and Mirjana Jakanović, staff members of Amica

Amica staff members Vjekoslava Perković and Mirjana Jakanović were both displaced during the war and they still remember how difficult it was in the early years. "We had no support, no space. In the beginning we were called a 'traitor organization.' There was great difficulty in making contact with people in the other entity. Now it is different. Anyone can come here without a problem."

Amica Srebrenica was the product of contacts between activist women of Srebrenica and Tuzla. Its goal is to help women and children, who account for most of the disadvantaged people in the town, as well as a majority of those returning. Amica advises women on how to support themselves, and it conducts entertainment and educational programs for children, especially pre-teens and younger. Its classes and meetings attract about 150 women, among them returnees, displaced persons, and local residents. Four teachers offer free courses in computer literacy, sewing, English, hairdressing, and printing. These activities overlap between education and psycho-social support.



No place for a kid: a former Srebrenica playground. Photo credit: Adzer van der Molen & Erna Rijdsdij.

Ms. Jakanović observes that the biggest problem facing women is unemployment. "All the other problems come from that. People can't return without work, and those who are here can't stay." Amica helps by offering women the use sewing machines. As in so many societies recovering from

war, sewing has been found to offer women companionship, work skills, a small income and even clothing for the family.



At the AMICA office

Much of Amica's work focuses on family problems, including domestic violence. The frustration caused by joblessness and displacement affects everyone, and it often manifests itself first in the home.

Vjekoslava suggests that the most useful help the world could give Amica would be assistance in setting up a market for knitted goods. Many women, in her estimation, could make a living from the sale of their products. She also notes that markets should be developed for the potentially rich local supply of organic fruits and herbs.

For children, Amica has a play area where musical activities, chess, painting, and dancing are organized. Around 300 children from elementary school age through eighth grade frequent the center. Amica also makes tutors available for children who need help with schoolwork.

In past summers, Amica has taken more than 50 children on summer outings to Dalmatia, together with children from Tuzla. Of one such trip Vjekoslava recounts, "They spent 15 days together. After the first day of getting to know each other, they play sports, have competitions. They are together all day every day. At the end, they cry when they are parting."

Amica also assists in the refugee return process in an informal way, as do most local NGOs. Amica staff members help returnees with their documentation, and with phone calls to set up appointments. Everyone benefits, regardless of their ethnicity, and like other NGO leaders Vjekoslava insists that assistance must not only be directed towards minority returns.

In an effort to promote reconciliation, Amica has been sponsoring a monthly "contact group" of women from Srebrenica and Tuzla since 1998. The group also organizes social evenings for returnees and local people.



The woman's role according to an AMICA poster

Among other foundations, Save the Children-Norway and the Dutch Refugee Foundation (Stifting Fluchteling) have helped Amica with their programs. But there are many ideas and projects that Amica would like to implement. Each of these does not necessarily require very much money, but resources are scarce. One program for which Amica would most like to find funding is a gynecological support

project. According to Amica director Vesna Jovanovic, gynecological care currently available in

the region is seriously inadequate, and it is necessary for women to travel either to Tuzla or Serbia in order to receive proper attention. If it can line up funding, Amica hopes to organize monthly trips for pap smears and mammograms.

Amica fills out its busy schedule with panel discussions on privatization, legal assistance, and health problems. It also provides a library and a reading room.

SARA

SARA is one of several grassroots groups in Srebrenica that are developing activities for youth and women. SARA works with children age 15 and older. They would be termed "at risk" in most Western countries, although the risks they face in Srebrenica are somewhat different.



Stana Medić and Valentina Gagić from SARA keep young people off the streets

Srebrenica has only one coffee house and a discotheque that opens on weekend nights. But Stana Medić and Valentina Gagić, activists on the staff of SARA, say that no one has money to go to these places, because 80 percent to 90 percent of the people of Srebrenica have no work. Thus, it is critical to provide free activities to "keep the youth off the streets."

Founded in 1999, SARA has held panel discussions on issues including juvenile delinquency, domestic violence, and women's health issues. And while drugs are not the problem in Srebrenica that they are in some larger towns in Bosnia, the staff of SARA find it wise to address this issue, together with AIDS, openly as well.

A regional "Youth Parliament" meets in Bijeljina to discuss problems of eastern Republika Srpska. It works on tolerance, democratization, and against prejudice, and holds debates about human rights. In the spring of 2002, SARA was preparing to send ten participants from Srebrenica.

SARA's main program is its "Open Center" in Srebrenica's Cultural Center. There, young people take free courses in English, computers, sewing, music, and painting. There is no movie theater in Srebrenica, but SARA provides a television and VCR on which people can watch rented films. On Saturday morning there are cartoons for little children.

SARA offers a welcome to people of all ethnic backgrounds. On International Women's day, it held a celebration with singing and games for children that was attended by Muslim returnees as well as displaced Serbs.

SARA's Open Center provides a place for youth to socialize and relax. Paintings that are the product of a recent art class for young people adorn the center's wall. A children's theater organizes plays that have drawn crowds of up to 150. SARA also organizes literary evenings, where poetry is read to guitar accompaniment. Twelve children are taking guitar lessons at SARA, and the organization sponsors a rock band, "Excalibur." This band plays for dances held

at the Open Center. For youth and adults SARA coordinates a volleyball team and women's aerobics sessions in the gymnasium of Srebrenica's elementary school.

SARA provides access to sewing machines for people who want to fix their clothing or sew new clothes, for their own use or for sale. The UNDP is supporting a multi-ethnic, four-month tailor training project for twelve women. At the end of the course two of these women will be chosen to run a tailor shop, which will specialize in the production of sheets and towels. The shop will become a privately owned local business, but it will share its equipment with other local women who want to use it. As the business grows, more of the trained women will be engaged.

Stana Medić is enthusiastic about regional and inter-entity exchanges among young people. For two summers SARA has brought youth from Srebrenica to attend multi-ethnic day camps in Kladanj, in the Croat-Muslim Federation.

SARA would like to do more for its participants, but it lacks the resources. It needs money to pay teachers of music and other classes. And SARA would like to organize a municipal volleyball league, but this would require financing for travel, equipment, and food.

New Hope Center for Democratization

As two-way return to and from Srebrenica picks up and roads and houses are repaired, another sort of reconstruction also must take place: the creation of democratic processes. In a society where grassroots participation has been almost non-existent, and in a municipality that was until recently ruled by separatist warlords, this is perhaps the most difficult and critical task of all.

One local organization that concerns itself directly with democratization is the “New Hope” Democratization Center and reading room.



Target for Democracy: This elderly Serb voted in the Srebrenica municipal elections, November 2000

The Center is staffed by Slavica Leka and Senka Zekić, both displaced persons from Sarajevo. The Center was founded in 1999 by the OSCE, as a reading room. The following year it was registered as an independent NGO. Support has come from the British, Dutch, and US Embassies, as well as the European Commission.

Governance in Srebrenica could best be described as chaotic. The Democratization Center has worked to change this by implementing programs that encourage participation at the grassroots level. The first and simplest of these has been to make information

more freely available to all Srebrenica residents through the reading room. The Center carries daily, weekly, and monthly newspapers and magazines from both entities of Bosnia and Herzegovina, as well as Serbia.

The Center is open to all visitors, and receives around 50 to 60 each day. In addition to news sources, the Center also makes children's books, dictionaries, and novels available. SFOR has donated some English books. The reading room also features a half dozen computers which the Center uses in its English and computer courses.

All municipalities in the former Yugoslavia are divided into basic governmental units called "local communities," or MZs (Mjesne Zajednice). The MZs are administrative centers for neighborhoods and villages, and provide services to these populations. Before the war there were 19 MZs in Srebrenica, comprising the town and over 200 villages. These MZs are just being recreated today, and the Democratization Center is providing training to the local leaders.

As Slavica Leka describes it, representatives of the MZs come to the Democratization Center where they learn about the most essential problems of their area, and also work on advocacy. "Water supply, road maintenance, clinics, schools, and garbage pickup -- these are the biggest problems," she says. The Democratization Center helps the representatives to identify targets of their advocacy by creating a database of local leaders, and by arranging discussions between them and the municipal government.

In addition to strengthening local governance, the Democratization Center has promoted public discussion of controversial issues in Srebrenica municipality -- something that would have been impossible during the first few years after the war. In 2001 the Center coordinated a series of ten radio programs with guest speakers, including the mayor of Srebrenica, representatives of Muslim returnees, the director of the Center for Social Work, and representatives from the local department of the Ministry for Refugees, the legal aid center, and the departments of construction and urbanism.

The topics of the radio discussions included the poor state of the economy, problems of urban development, and legal questions regarding return and property rights. These programs were aired on Srebrenica radio and Radio Palma in Bratunac. Slavica Leka said they provoked a lively exchange between officials and the citizens who called in. She noted that this was the first time that a program of this nature had been aired on the radio in the Republika Srpska.

The Democratization Center has also organized panel discussions featuring people from Srebrenica, Sarajevo, and Tuzla, where most displaced Srebrenicans live. One meeting discussed religion in the educational system, which is particularly sensitive. Other panel discussions covered respect for human rights, and shortcomings in the legal system. Ms. Leka characterized these discussions as tolerant.

One problem that is hampering the work of the Democratization Center, as well as that of every other NGO in town, is inadequate access to the Internet caused by the poor telephone system. Persistent users might get onto the Internet once or twice a week, usually late at night. Asked

whether there were plans to repair the system, Ms. Leka replied, “They always talk about everything, but nothing gets fixed.”

But communications technology cannot substitute for a revitalized city. “All of the NGOs have computers,” said Ms. Leka. “But computers are little use if there are no children in town. It is nice to have heating, but if there is no food, and no money for textbooks, we can’t help people.”

Her colleague, Senka Zekić, agreed. “There are more older people returning, with pensions,” she said. “But the younger people have no work. Or they have now grown up in the city, and have gotten used to living there. The economy and the factories are dead here. No one needs an empty town.”