

On the Record: Refugee Returns to Srebrenica

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The Forum of Srebrenica NGOs

Srebrenica has always presented a formidable challenge for NGO activists -- and they have risen to the challenge. NGOs refused to allow the rest of the world to forget Srebrenica between 1996 and 2000. They will play a critical role in the reconstruction of Srebrenica in the coming period, by providing support for returnees and displaced, support for those who are evicted, and monitoring the process of reconstruction.

An important factor in the work of Srebrenica's local organizations is the [Forum of Srebrenica NGOs](#), founded in 2001 to coordinate the work of a growing network of grassroots groups. The Forum was established with encouragement and financial support from the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), which worked in Srebrenica from 2000 through 2002. The DRC called representatives from grassroots groups together, and they decided to create the Forum as an umbrella organization.

The Forum serves as a clearing-house for information among its member organizations. Meetings are held each month -- either in Tuzla or in Srebrenica -- where representatives of the organizations can keep each other informed about their programs and their problems. For example, they might announce plans of pre-return visits from Srebrenica to Donji Vakuf, or from Lukavac to Srebrenica. In this way, each organization can help publicize projects and provide information about potential participants.

The Forum has also engaged in "capacity building" for its member organizations, sponsoring training sessions in such topics as conflict resolution, media work, and management throughout 2001. The Danish Refugee Council provided critical financial support for the Forum in 2001, and the Dutch relief organization Cordaid ensured the organization's existence throughout 2002.

The Forum also organizes regular pre-return visits of displaced persons both to and from Srebrenica. In recent months it has taken displaced Serbs from Srebrenica to Glamoc, Donji Vakuf, and the outlying neighborhoods of Sarajevo. And it has organized -- with significant participation from Drina and Srebrenica 99 -- visits and resettlement projects of displaced Muslims from the surroundings of Tuzla and Sarajevo to the villages around Srebrenica. "We are bringing people who want to return to see their property, to meet donors," Novak Simic comments.

As well as offering coordination to other NGOs, the Forum is also reminding internal relief organizations that there is more to reconstruction than the return of Muslim refugees and massacre survivors. As these pages show, many Serbs were displaced from the destroyed villages around Srebrenica and are now living in homes that were formerly owned by Muslims. As more Muslims return, these Serbs must either find alternative accommodation or return home. But they receive noticeably less support than returning Muslims. There simply is no such thing as one-way return. The Forum constantly presses this point with the agencies.

The Forum also supports sports and cultural programs that help bring together young people from both entities of Bosnia in the interest of reconciliation. It has organized indoor soccer, basketball, and chess tournaments encompassing three municipalities in the Federation and three

in the Republika Srpska. According to Mr. Simic, amateur cultural associations from Vogosca, Ilijas, and Tuzla would like to organize exchange programs with Srebrenica similar to programs that existed before the war.

Forum Goals: New Facilities, Better Communication

The Forum's great hope is to bring all its member organizations together under one roof in Srebrenica. It has applied for and received permission from the municipal government to renovate a building in the center of Srebrenica, next door to the municipal hall. This three-story building, now a shell, used to house the town library, a cultural association, and a theater. In late 2002 the new mayor of Srebrenica, Abdurahman Malkic, placed the building in the Forum's control for ten years.

Today, the building needs everything: doors, windows, plumbing, electricity, furnishings, and repair of the roof. Estimates of the cost start at 100,000 Euros (\$105,000). The Forum is discussing the project with the European Commission, but nothing has been resolved yet. The members of the Forum unanimously support this project. They feel that having a common meeting place would make it easier for them to work together and present a united front when meeting donors and relief organizations.

There remains much for them to do. In addition to the decrepit health clinic and firehouse, schools in Srebrenica and Potocari need to be repaired, and equipped with computers. Long-neglected roads need to be rebuilt, displaced people need assistance in returning. Above all, Srebrenica's long-suffering residents must make a living.

The members of the Forum are focused on all of these problems, but in order to achieve results, they know they must become more effective advocates and speak with one voice. President of the Forum Novak Simic says that improving the Forum's communications capacity would be a big step in the right direction. It would, he says, empower the Forum as a network and help it better communicate the needs of its members.

It was NGOs that initiated the first inter-entity contact after the war, often at great personal risk. The oldest and best known is probably Bosfam, formed in 1994 before the fall of Srebrenica. After the massacre, Bosfam offered the traumatized widows from Srebrenica a place to meet and take their minds off their losses by working at the loom. Bosfam's wall-hangings, carpets, and sweaters are world-famous. The Advocacy Project is currently working with Bosfam to revitalize its web site and to expand promotion of its handicrafts.

Two NGOs that deserve credit for initiating the first returns to the villages around Srebrenica are Drina and Srebrenica 99. Srebrenica 99 took the initiative in encouraging refugees to return to the village of Sućeska in June 1999, and helped the first settlers survive the first winter in tents. By early 2002, Drina had taken over most of the direct support for the returnees in the villages around Srebrenica, including Sućeska.

In servicing the needs of displaced persons and returnees, these activists have created the rudiments of a civil society that was lacking under the authoritarian regime that ruled Bosnia

before the war. Many of their members, particularly the women, are also continuing the work that they began while the armies were still in the trenches. Munira Beba Hadzic, the director of Bosfam, is one good example.

They are stepping into a void that would, in ordinary times, be filled by government. For example, the Center for Legal Assistance, supported by the International Rescue Committee, provides legal counseling for returning refugees, who have to negotiate a bureaucratic maze when they try to reclaim pre-war property.



***Nowhere to play:
Srebrenica's children are
a priority for NGOs***

Photo credit: Adzer van der Molen & Erna Rijdsdijk

Often the needs of the returnees are of a psychological nature, as much as anything else. It is fine that international organizations are fixing roofs and providing stoves to returnees. But the activists say, "it is not

enough to have a place to sit between four walls." The returnees are overwhelmed -- alone, unemployed, sometimes hungry, often traumatized. It is particularly difficult for women -- thousands of whom are widows -- and children.

Bosfam found early on that the best way to help traumatized survivors was to provide them with a chance to meet other survivors, and also to work. Some organizations offer psychosocial counseling. One of these, Amica, also addresses the same need through social and educational activities. Many organizations provide classes in useful skills, such as English, computers, and sewing. Some provide a way of earning a minimal amount of money in a setting where almost no one is employed. Sara is another member of the Forum that is offering programs to keep the children busy. Srebrenica 99 regularly sponsors activities at its youth center, including classes in English, computer skills, art and photography.

NGOs play a critically important role in rebuilding inter-ethnic trust. It is not possible to march out publicly under a banner of "reconciliation," but the process is taking place, all the same. For several years, some groups have been organizing cross-entity multi-ethnic camp programs for children. Such projects are proliferating now, and growing into longer summer outings to the sea.

Many NGOs provide living proof that reconciliation can work by hiring Serbs and Muslims on their staff. As displaced people, they all share a common language and experience. Often, this

seems more powerful than ethnicity.

Their programs are open to all. One example is the Bosfam sweater program. When financial support is available, the women of Bosfam -- both Serbs and Muslim returnees in Srebrenica, and displaced Muslim women in Tuzla -- knit sweaters for a small fee. The sweaters are then donated to the needy schoolchildren of Srebrenica, most of whom are from displaced Serb families.

Amica has also been facilitating contact between the displaced Srebrenican women in Tuzla and Serb women living in Srebrenica since 1998. Over 150 women come regularly for classes (in English, computers, sewing, and hairdressing) and companionship. Amica was the first ethnically mixed organization in Srebrenica and has plans to expand its services to psychotrauma counseling in schools.

How NGOs are Filling the Gap

As important as anything else is the way that NGOs provide credible and essential information in a society where information has been distorted, used to keep people ignorant and also spread ethnic hatred. NGOs are filling the gap in several important ways:

- Coordinating information from displaced persons to housing and refugee ministries, and they bring information on property laws back to displaced people.
- Informing relief organizations of where assistance is most needed. This includes who needs to return and which houses need to be repaired. They also communicate with international governments, the United Nations, and international NGOs about the material needs of the returnees, including food, tents, generators, blankets, seeds, tools, medical clinics, schools, etc.
- Informing their constituency of the practical and legal means to enable them to return. (Most of the beneficiaries are displaced people within BiH, not those refugees already settled abroad and unlikely to return.) This means providing displaced persons in BiH with information about property laws, how to make their property claims, and what documentation they will need. It can also mean organizing group visits to pre-war property and clean-up days. Forum members often coordinate delivery of direct donations.
- Filling the role of the local press, which was shut down by international organizations in 2001.

Since that time, the local people have only had access to the press brought in from Sarajevo and Banja Luka, which does not provide essential local information about Srebrenica. Local NGOs have become the most reliable source of information in the area. For example, the Democratization Center, one of the Forum's members, produced ten radio programs in 2001 to discuss problems in the community such as poor water supply, deteriorating roads, and poorly

equipped medical clinics. This was the first time these subjects had been discussed in public in the Republika Srpska in such a way.

Civil society will also play a critical role in monitoring the process of reconstruction in the months ahead, and reconstruction will involve much more than money. It will mean rebuilding a society that has been damaged and traumatized almost beyond belief, and if it is to succeed it will need to be open and transparent.

Reconstruction and the Responsibility of Civil Society

Reconstruction will need to empower and strengthen local NGOs, instead of undermining their capacity (as so often happens when international aid suddenly pours in). It will need to address the dilemmas of accountability and provide a final resting place for the victims of the massacres. It will need to pay special attention to vulnerable groups, and the fact that so many heads of household are headed by widows.

The task of monitoring this process, and making sure that the international and local community is kept informed, will fall to civil society.

This will require the NGOs to work together, and one of the most encouraging developments is the creation of the Forum of Srebrenica NGOs, a network of eight organizations that formed in 2001. They include all of the organizations profiled on this page except Bosfam, which is actively considering joining.

The initiative for founding the Forum was taken by the Danish Refugee Council, now withdrawn from Srebrenica. All of its members have an impressive track record in working not just for the return of refugees, but for reconciliation between Bosniacs and Serbs. To qualify for membership, they must engage in humanitarian work and lobby for two-way return. The Forum received formal legal status as a nongovernmental organization in the summer of 2002.

The vital role of civil society was acknowledged by the UN Development Program in preparation for a donor conference that was held in May of 2002. According to the UNDP report prepared for the conference, "Community groups will no doubt have an essential role in mobilizing resources and the will to heal the wounds and facilitate social integration. . . . [they] need to enable and foster the rehabilitation of social services and to help establish an appropriate political, social, moral, and spiritual climate, and to make return both desirable and sustainable."

Nothing is easy in Srebrenica. The ordinary people do not trust their politicians, and the residue of fear and hostility still lingers. But the activists have chosen to look forward, not backwards, and ask how they can recreate the town that they once loved. They are the heart of the reconstruction of Srebrenica. Their courage is an inspiration, and it must be supported. This is the hope of The Advocacy Project in the months ahead.

New Members:

The Forum of Citizens of Srebrenica is an organization of Serb and Muslim citizens of Srebrenica, pre-war residents who have returned. The organization's goal is to lobby the local government to improve conditions for Srebrenica's residents. They promote this work by educating their constituency, including publishing a monthly newsletter that is printed both in Cyrillic and the Latin alphabet.

SAROS is the acronym for the Association of Refugees and Displaced Persons of the Sarajevo-Romanija region -- Romanija being the range of mountains between Sarajevo and Srebrenica. This organization, based in Srebrenica, assists displaced persons from Sarajevo who are located in Srebrenica and the towns between there and Sarajevo, as well as displaced Muslims from nearby towns in the same region.

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.

Srebrenica Danas-Sutra ("Today-Tomorrow"), a multi-ethnic organization composed of pre-war citizens of Srebrenica, was founded last year. It works for sustainable return to Srebrenica and reconciliation among the municipality's residents. Danas-Sutra is currently implementing a survey of potential returnees for Austria Hilfswerk. The organization has distributed clothing and household furnishings to returnees, and is seeking a donor to support small agricultural businesses.

Women's Association "Zelja" Skelani is located on the river Drina in Skelani, at the far end of Srebrenica municipality. Founded in 1999, this organization assists local and returnee women by providing courses in English, computers, and sewing. Zelja has established a playground for children, and provides food packages to returnees and the elderly. The organization also provides legal counseling, and campaigns against domestic violence. Zelja supports two-way return, and sponsors activities and seminars to promote reconciliation among local residents.

Association of Returnees "Potocari - Srebrenica" is composed of returnees to the Potocari settlement of Srebrenica municipality. The organization was registered last December and does

not yet have an office, nor has it implemented any programs. "Potocari's" goals are to improve conditions for returnees and to promote reconciliation.

Multiple Sclerosis Association of the Birac Region formed in the spring of 2000. It advocates and provides care for MS patients in Srebrenica and several surrounding municipalities. The organization has 52 beneficiaries, most of them pensioners, and over half of them quadriplegic. The main objectives of the organization are finding new members, arranging gatherings, socializing, and providing support for MS victims. The Multiple Sclerosis Association expects support from the UNDP in obtaining direct medical assistance for its members.

Women's Forum of Bratunac is based in Bratunac and implements a number of programs to assist returning women and local women in need. It is a multi-cultural organization operating throughout the Bratunac municipality. The Women's Forum works to promote women's rights and to educate women in order to enhance their role as participants in the development of civil society and the reestablishment of Bratunac as a multiethnic town. The organization provides counseling, English and computer training, a reading room, and a sewing facility where members can work on tailoring projects and earn money.

Priroda ("Nature") is based in Bratunac and implements programs in rural areas of resettlement. It provides support for the reintegration of returnees in the areas of health care, educational workshops, and creative programs for women and children. Its work includes occupational therapy for women to help them improve their economic position.