



On the Record: Returning Refugees to Bosnia

Issue 16: July 10, 2000

In the Tents: Citizens of Kopači Insist on Return

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From the AP Editorial Desk

Last winter, a single-minded group of Bosniak (Bosnian Muslim) refugees decided they had had enough. No longer would they be fobbed off by stony-faced bureaucrats, or intimidated by the threat of violence. It was time to return home to their homes in Kopači.

So they took matters into their own hands and set up a tent encampment near the inter-entity borderline (IEBL), which divides the two Bosnian entities. They hoped that this would shock both governments, and the international community, into allowing them to return to their former homes in Kopači. They could see some of the houses from the tents. This helped to sustain them.

The Kopači encampment may have set a precedent and broken the logjam. Hundreds of other displaced Bosniaks have now set up tents near their villages. Here they wait for permission to return home and for international assistance to rebuild their houses.

What motivates people to take such action? How did they live during the winter months? Have they succeeded? How were they organized? How has the international community reacted?

Last December, Peter Lippman visited the tent people of Kopači to find out.

The Camp Goes Up

The refugees from Kopači worked hard throughout the summer and fall of 1999. They pressed their case with the Office of the High Representative (OHR), with Bosnian government officials, and with intermediaries from the Serb Republic -- but to no avail.

By late October their efforts had been repeatedly thwarted, and they were inclined to take

stronger measures. With the cold weather approaching, around 200 people set up tents on the main highway north out of Goražde and vowed to stay there until they were allowed to go home to Kopači.

In December I visited this tent encampment, right on the border between Goražde and Srpsko (Serb) Goražde. One of the tent people, Džemila Hubjer, told me how it had come about:

"For four years after Dayton, we pursued legal avenues to get back into our homes. There were no results. The humanitarian organizations World Vision, GOAL, and DER came and agreed to repair 70 houses that had been wrecked during the war. A pilot project was begun to fix some of the houses, but the Serb government halted this on October 15."

"The Serb-controlled municipal government of Srpsko Goražde voted to stop the repairs. They sent police and inspectors. We had started to plant wheat in the fields, so that we could live off of our own work when we returned, with our own flour. But then they stopped our farm work. They have no respect for any kind of law, Dayton or otherwise."

"On October 20, Serb civilians and the police came to stop us from going to plant. They made barricades on the road. They threatened to rape us, to 'make Serb children,' to take us to their churches and to convert us. People came from the factories to get in our way. We have been waiting for them to return to their empty houses in Goražde, but they won't return. We are willing to work with the Serbs who stay there. If they can guarantee my security in Kopači, then we can do the same in Goražde."

"When we were prevented from planting and repairing our houses, and we were faced with being evicted from Serb-owned houses in Goražde, we decided to stay here at the border with the Republika Srpska. We, the people, did this -- no one else. We have been in the tents since October 26."

Himzo Bajramović added, "We went to clean up rubble around our damaged houses. We wanted to start fixing them up. But the Serb government forbade us to fix our houses, and they succeeded in delaying repairs until the winter. This is not the first time in the last four years that this has happened. That is why we decided to make the tent encampment."

Mr. Bajramović showed me the order from the Republika Srpska Ministry of Urban Planning requiring repairs on the houses to cease. It was written in Cyrillic, signed by Miladin Pešić, who was subsequently removed from his position as head of the local Ministry for Refugees by the international community.

The Tent People

The tent encampment stood immediately by the road out of Goražde, not far from the Drina river. A few meters further down the road was the border between the Federation and the Republika Srpska. There were five tents of varying sizes, most of them large enough to hold 20 to 30 people. On the tents signs were pasted that said, "Kopači is the Key to Annex 7 of the Dayton agreement," and "Kopači is the Key to Return to Southeastern Bosnia." The tents were

lined up in front of several houses that were destroyed during the war. Although these houses now have no roofs or windows, some activities of the encampment were taking place there.

A huge pile of firewood was stacked in a clearing between the houses. Nearby was a pile of coal. A canopy sheltered an outdoor campfire, and several men and women sit around the fire on benches. One woman was knitting; a man read a newspaper. In early December, the weather was brisk, in the high 30s F. Up the road at the end of a field, a stream ran down to the Drina. An improvised outhouse was built over this stream.

A man chopped wood, and others hung around outside of the tents, walking from one to another, talking and visiting. From time to time a truck drove up with a delivery of food or fuel. The effort was supported mainly by NGOs from around Bosnia, as well as by individual donations. Occasionally a delegation of visitors from another town came to offer moral support to the campers.

The encampment started out with 200 people, but with colder weather shrank to around 100. There were people from 7 months of age up to 80. Most of the adults were out of work -- the Goražde economy employed around 12,000 people before the war, but now fewer than ten percent of those people have jobs. Camp residents who worked or were in school left during the day and returned afterwards. Before the encampment was formed, these displaced people lived with relatives or in a collective center. Some told me they had been living in ruined houses. Some were about to be evicted to free up their houses for returning Serbs.

I asked if there were anyone who had been evicted. One man said, "I have to be out of the house by December 22." I asked him where he would go. He said, "To the tents, and then to my home. My house in Kopači is fine, but others need to be fixed."

I entered a tent. It was fairly well lit, with beds around the edges, and a coffee table in the center. A wood stove stood in one corner, and a couple of women tended to the coffee. This was the women's tent, but men would come in and visit. Since the hospitality (the coffee) was better here than in the men's tents, it was the center of the socializing, and people came and went constantly. Some older women sat quietly around the edges of the tent. Men came in and talked boisterously. The older ones talked, and the younger ones listened. A certain amount of flirting went on; one man pointed to a middle-aged woman and told me that I should find a husband for her -- "her teeth are good." I replied that I was a researcher, not a matchmaker.

Akifa Dučić told me: "There are seven families in this tent. Conditions are not hygienic. Some people are sick. Some of the people here were living in the transit center. In Goražde, I was in a house belonging to a Serb. I'll never say that it is my house; he earned that house. He should be in his house, and I in mine."

"I lived in the transit center for one year. Before that I was in Germany for three years. I have four children and a husband. The Red Cross has brought us some food. The children won't eat their vegetables. It doesn't bother me to be here, but I'm sorry for the children."

I left the women's tent and strolled around. A member of the refugee association who was

making a video of the encampment took me to the clinic, a bare room in one of the ruined houses nearby. There, a young woman was taking an older woman's blood pressure. In another room in the same house, three older men were sitting.

Ismet Čosović told me, "In Kopači, I had 64 beehives before the war. That produced three tons of honey a year. During the war, you could sell a kilo of honey for 30 DM. I had 60 dunums, that is, 6 hectares of land. Now I live on a pension, and it comes five months late. I want to return to my land. I would have cows, bees, and 50 chickens. If I could go home, the pension I get now would be like pocket money. I had a tractor. My only wish is to return to what is mine; they should live on their property. That would be the best thing, the most correct."

"The Serbs were our neighbors and could be now. But their leadership is preventing this. I could go home tomorrow. I have talked with the people there, and I know them, except for a large number who are from Sarajevo. They have visited Sarajevo."

"If only ten families could return, then within six months, return would really be moving. But the Serb government is telling people that they would have great difficulty living in Gorazde. However, over there the pension is around 60 or 70 DM, and on this side it is 200."

"I'd like to go home -- today rather than tomorrow -- because I'd like to work on my own property. I'd be the most happy, when you could visit me at my home."

I proceeded to a tent that held about eight men. Two were playing chess, and two more were observing the game. Others, all in their 60s and older, were lounging on cots and smoking. While I talked with them, a younger man came in and loaded a wood stove.

The men took turns telling me their stories. One told me that he lost a daughter and three grandchildren in the war. His son was wounded. "I owned 120 dunums of land, with two houses and three barns. That was all torched. The houses in lower Kopači survived, but all those in the hills were burned."

Another man tells me, "I have been left all alone. My property was destroyed too. My son-in-law, brother, and grandson were all killed." Someone nearby muttered, "God preserve him."

A third man said, "We were deceived by the former Yugoslavia. We all worked hard, but they took everything from Bosnia. Then in 1994 they bombed us with planes that came from Serbia. I was in the basement, and there were twelve of us that survived. But the house we were in was flattened. Whoever stayed in Kopači after that did not survive. They were either burned up or murdered."

Ragib Mašić told me, "I am seventy years old. In 1941 there was a catastrophe too. I was finishing elementary school then. When the war broke out, I escaped to Kosovo. The 'Chetniks' were killing us then too, not the Germans. I walked all the way to Mitrovica, carrying a pack on my back that weighed 60 kilos. Now I'm struggling to return, again."

"My grandfather died in World War I. My father died in World War II. In this war it was my turn, but I lived. My son Lama was wounded; they had his stomach out on the table, but he lived.

He has three children."

"Kopači was never the Serbs', and it won't be. All that land where the factories are, that's ours. We had everything, cattle, and now we live like Gypsies [sic], in tents, asking for a handout. I would need 10,000 DM to repair my property."

"I had three houses in Kopači. There are 21 people in my family. Some of them are now in Sarajevo, but most of them are here. Instead of being in a tent, I should be resting, enjoying my last years. I have a pension of 170 dm. I left behind two cows and a horse and escaped with only my head."

"When we went to plant in the fall, we had around 20 people and a couple of tractors. The Serbs made a barricade and cursed at us, and the police said that it was not safe. Then we decided to stay here. We didn't ask anyone for permission. It's not more comfortable for most of us in Goražde than it is here."

"Some Serbian boys came to harass us today. They don't know anything. They waved three fingers at us (Serbian nationalist sign). But we are teaching our children that we must live together, act decently, and create a new history."

Grudging International Response

While many international officials publicly recognize the fundamental right to return, many quietly resent the pressure that the tent people have generated. Local politicians in the Federation offered declarative support to the encampment, but without straining themselves to help. There was no comment from the Serb side. Perhaps the Serbs were counting on being able to use their customary forms of obstruction.

One international official from England was not surprised at the lack of enthusiasm for the tent people. "They are saying the same things about the tent encampment that they said about the Peace Camp in England the 1980s, that it was 'manipulated,' that the 'campers were being paid to stay there,' and so on. However, I'm all in favor of direct action."

Others were not so supportive. One told me: "Even if everyone camped out on the IEBL, it wouldn't make return happen any faster." However, he admitted, "The international community, like the politicians, doesn't want to be pressured."

Accusations of manipulation came from many sides, but rarely were they specific. On November 18, OHR spokesman Oleg Milišić stated, "...the attitudes of the heads of some of the local displaced person organizations to resolving this problem are somewhat muddled. It is not clear why they would allow the very people whose interests they are there to protect to sleep in tents for so long and for this, at this time, which is so close to winter."

The tent people insist that the idea was theirs, and theirs alone. Akifa Dučić told me, "No money, gold, or the riches of the world can keep me from my house. I want the world to know that this is not a political action. The politicians lied to us for seven years. All I want is to be in my home. I

am not interested in politics. No one can come in here and tell me where to go. No one can tell me to go back to Goražde. Tomorrow we will return."

Vahid Kanlić said, "It is clear to everyone who has come here that the displaced people are embittered by the four years of manipulation of their chances for return, and that this is the only reason why they are in the tents: for return to Kopači."

Activists like Kanlić are convinced that those in power have no interest in changing the status quo. "The easiest thing is to rely on the accusation of manipulation and to shield oneself from responsibility."

There was particularly frustration at the lack of support offered by the Muslim government of the Federation. No senior officials came to visit the encampment until the middle of January. Increasingly, the activists for return in southeast Bosnia placed their hopes in the international officials.

Obstructionists Go Down

In late November, High Representative Wolfgang Petritsch, together with Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) head Robert Barry, took measures that gave some amount of satisfaction to the inhabitants of the tents.

Petritsch and Barry removed 22 local officials from office. These officials included mayors, cantonal governors, and heads of local housing commission, and all of them had made it their business to prevent return from taking place. Three officials were sacked in Goražde/Srpsko Goražde alone—a high number for one small corner of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Among the officials removed were the mayor of Srpsko Goražde, Slavko Topalović (whom I had met earlier in the year); the mayor of Goražde, Elvedin Hrelja; and the head of the Srpsko Goražde Municipal Refugee Ministry, Miladin Pešić.

The OHR stated that Topalović was removed because of "consistent and uncompromising obstruction to Kopači-Srpsko Goražde, specifically through control of the OMI (Municipal Ministry for Refugees), restricting reconstruction and failing to respond in a responsible manner to a crisis in returns in this region."

While the residents of the tent encampment were happy that Topalović and Pešić were removed, they were skeptical about the likelihood of change. Džemila Hubjer said, "When they remove Slavko Topalović, the Serb leaders of Srpsko Goražde can find another hundred people like him. See what they are doing to us with this property decision, which allows us to use fields and ruined houses that are many kilometers out of Kopači, while we still have not received permission to return to 15 repaired houses in my village."

On the other hand, no one at the tent encampment was able to explain the removal of Hrelja. Mr. Bajramović described Hrelja as a "sacrificial lamb, who did not do anything. He is only being removed for balance. He constantly called on the Serbs to return, and he opened their houses up.

I am very sorry about Hrelja -- he did more than anyone. We would do whatever we could to have him return, but Petritsch has decided."

The statement released by the OHR on the removal of the 22 local officials gave some details on Hrelja's transgressions: "persistent and serious obstruction of the General Framework Agreement for Peace [the Dayton Agreement], including but not restricted to blatant abuse of housing financed by the international community, ignoring the authority and legitimacy of the municipal council, and fostering division and intolerance during a crisis in returns."

Apparently, Hrelja's constituents in the tents were either unaware of his infractions, or they were in denial. But they were nevertheless highly appreciative of the rest of the removals, saying, as did people all around the country, that they should have been done much earlier.

This was strongest measure to date from international officials, and evidence of a new determination in the face of never-ending obstruction. As displaced people huddled in the tents at Kopači, and the year 1999 drew to a close, it seemed to be exactly what