



On the Record: Returning Refugees to Bosnia

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From the AP Editorial Desk

Muslims are not the only ones who find it hard to return home. Serb refugees also face opposition and hostility. In other words, there is intolerance, discrimination, and hatred on both sides of the Inter-Entity Boundary Line (IEBL) that splits Bosnia.

Several hundred Serb families have registered to return to Goražde, but by the end of 1999, only around 20 families had actually gone home.

Why was the figure so low? The tent people are convinced that Serb leaders are preventing the displaced Serbs of Goražde from leaving Kopači. One of the tent people, Džemila Hubjer, puts the blame on Slavko Topalović, who was the mayor on Kopači until he was removed from office by the High Representative last November. She told Peter: 'Topalović did all he could to prevent return, by frightening the displaced people who live in our houses. The man who is occupying my house said to me, 'I can't talk to you, they'll kill me.'

Many people could leave, but their government won't allow them.

Another tent person, Ismet Čosović put it like this: 'When some Serbs came to the inter-entity borderline and stopped us from planting, many of them didn't want to. The manager of the factory ordered them to go. They were afraid to talk openly. One of them told me, 'I'm afraid to talk to you -- they'll call me five times to interrogate me.'

"A Serb woman came to drink coffee with us and told us not to tell anyone. She said, 'Be persistent; when you are able to go back to Kopači, we will be able to go to Goražde.' But we can't go to Kopači safely, because they will beat us."

'There were 4,000 people employed at the factories before the war. We celebrated each other's holidays together, in the churches and in the mosques. The people are not responsible for the present situation, or guilty -- only some individuals. Those individuals know where their place is.'

Yet another tent person insisted: 'Their government doesn't let them go. If they didn't want to come back to Goražde, they would not have registered to return.'

So what is the truth? Are Serbs from Goražde prevented from returning by the Serb authorities? Or by pressures in Goražde? Peter Lippman of the Advocacy Project sought some answers from the Serb Citizens' Council, a prominent organization that advocates on behalf of Serbs -- but from inside the Federation. This composition gives the Council unusual credibility.

In this, the concluding issue of this 'mini-series,' Peter reviews developments around Kopači since his visit to the tent people last December. He also assesses the prospects for refugee returns in southeast Bosnia over the next few months.

The Advocacy Corner: The Serb Citizens' Council

The Serb Citizens' Council-Citizens' Movement for Equality (SGV-GPR) is a non-nationalist human rights organization with branches in many parts of Bosnia. It was formed during the war to represent Serbs who remained as a minority in besieged Sarajevo and other Federation towns. These Serbs opposed the separatist aims of the Republika Srpska regime.

In Goražde, the Serb Citizens' Council operates a storefront counseling center for people of all ethnicities who need assistance in understanding and coping with the regulations and obstructionism that confront attempts to return in all directions.

Boris Sadovski provided me background on his organization, as well as an evaluation of the atmosphere for Serb return to Goražde.

'The SGV was formed here in 1995 during the war. At that time it was called the Civic Movement of Serbs. There were around 500 Serbs who had stayed in Goražde during the war. By the end of the war, only 150 remained. Now, around 20 families have returned.'

'We do legal interpreting for people. People come here and ask us about the law. We work with the human rights ombudsman. We had a lawyer, but now there is no money. We help people fill out questionnaires, and we give them advice. When people come here, they submit requests for return of their apartments and their property. They also apply for pensions and look for work.'

'In 1999 there were over 1,300 requests for return of apartments: 250 decisions were given, 14 of which were carried out. A body of Goražde's municipal government makes these decisions. There is mistrust in the good will of the government to implement Annex 7. But those displaced Muslims who are in Serb apartments here cannot return in the other direction, either. So we are working for a political solution on both sides.'

'There is a political duality. The politicians of all three ethnicities are in favor of the status quo, but in front of the international community, they appear cooperative. For example, Goražde is called an 'open city.' But it is not enough to declare a city 'open' and invite displaced people home. What will they live on? First, their houses need to be fixed. Some apartments here have been opened to Serbs, but not enough. Then, they need to secure employment. Multi-ethnic court and police systems are also essential. Finally, in the schools, they are teaching the Bosniak language. We used to speak Serbo-Croatian, and now the Bosniak language has been imposed. A mono-national history is being taught.'

'In the area of return, there have been two steps forward, and one back. The names of the streets, shops, and schools have all been changed to Muslim names. For Serbs, it is as if they are returning to another town, not their own. The Serb cemeteries have been damaged, and the chapel was burned. Now, there is only one street in town with a Serb name.

'When someone gets a resolution on return to their property, they get an answer from the housing committee. The new housing law says that eviction can take place within 15 days. However, then the municipal committee tells them that they must come back tomorrow, or the day after.'

Mr. Sadovski showed me an October 30, 1999, report on return to Goražde. It listed several problems:

'The level of mistrust in the good will of the official government to implement obligations from Annex 7 is high. Officials obstruct the implementation of their own decisions, so that it comes to a dead end for return of refugees and displaced persons.

--The transit center is inadequate.

--There is a lack of employment for returnees.

--There is disrespect for the legal provisions for implementation, including the legal deadlines.

--The municipal commission for property claims often behaves arrogantly toward the returnees.

--The laws on abandoned apartments have not yet begun to be applied.

This helps to explain why the mayor of Goražde was one of the 22 officials removed last November. Mr. Sadovski asserted that the ordinary people of Goražde themselves are ready to accept Serb return. 'People in Goražde have definitely accepted the need to live together,' he said. 'Certainly there will be a change, and there will also be one in April, at the polls.'

Mr. Sadovski spoke of his own history: 'I stayed here during the war because it is my town. I have no other place. I did not have a problem here in Goražde during the war. I knew what would happen at the end, that people would try to live together again. I could have left; I had the opportunity, but I didn't take it.'

'I don't go to Kopači now, because those of us Serbs who stayed in Goražde during the war are considered traitors. Also, those Serbs who are returning here are called traitors. The elite who run the Serb municipality are extremists, and they make strong propaganda. But people are coming back anyway. More than 50 Serb houses are being fixed.'

'In Srpsko Goražde, it is dangerous to talk about return. People come here secretly, because they fear that someone will torch the house that they are living in, over there. What the extremists fear is, who will be the mayor of Srpsko Goražde if the Muslims return? It is purely a struggle for power, because that was a Muslim suburb, as well as an industrial zone.'

'They should arrest the war criminals; that's a big reason people don't return. The international community has wasted a lot of time on this. It would have been better if they had done it earlier, then everything would be fixed now. The war is not really over. Many people in the international community are not really qualified to be working on creating a democratic community here.'

Mr. Sadovski pointed to a clock on the wall. 'See the clock there? It says five minutes to midnight. Around it are pictures of children. It is almost midnight for these children.'

Winter Ends: Back to Kopači, More Obstruction

The tent people held on throughout the winter, showing great persistence and creating a headache for both local and international officials. But the response of these officials was sluggish, and it was not until January that Prime Minister of the Bosnian Federation Edhem Bićakčić paid a visit to the camp.

In mid-December, the biggest snowstorm in Bosnia in over 50 years shut down most of the country, blocking roads and causing extended power outages in many towns. There was snow to spare for the Goražde encampment. Two of the five tents were knocked down, and some of the children and older people were sent to shelters in town.

But most others remained, determined to stick out the wintry weather. Akifa Dučić said, 'It is not worse for us here than in the wrecked houses we live in, in town. We will not even speak about leaving.'

International officials expressed impatience and suggested that it was time to fold up the tents. This produced a spirited response from Džemila Hubjer, who said: 'If they are not helping us now, while we're freezing out here, what would they do if we returned to Goražde? Those who are telling us to go back are telling us to re-occupy Serb houses.'

Finally, on March 11, 2000, leaders of the camp held a meeting with officials from the international community. Representatives from the OHR, IPTF (U.N. police), and the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) were present. Ever since the removal of the mayor of Serb Goražde, these officials had impressed on the municipal government the importance of cooperating with the tent people. An agreement was now crafted that allowed them to start returning home.

The agreement specified that returnees would first occupy two Muslim-owned houses in Kopači. That same day, over 40 refugees moved into these houses. The plan was that they would then be allowed to move into eight more houses within a week, while the Serb occupants of these eight houses (all displaced from Goražde) would also return home at the same time. As it happened, the Muslim returnees were to remain in the two houses for almost three months.

Extremists on the Serb side did not exactly receive the returnees with open arms. On the first day after their arrival, someone set off a bomb in front of the house of Mujo Sišić. Posters of the hard-line former president of the Republika Srpska Nikola Poplašen were also plastered around the town on the same day.

Several days later, the person who planted the bomb was arrested, but the harassment has continued to the time of this writing. In late March, someone threw a rock through the window of one of the houses occupied by returning Muslims, and someone planted a bomb by an unoccupied Muslim-owned house. A fountain in front of another house was demolished, and shots were fired at another house. Drunken men would walk the streets near the re-occupied houses singing nationalist songs. Returnees were often threatened.

In addition to this harassment, the authorities in Serb Goražde have found other ways of undermining the returns. They have found money to build emergency houses for displaced Serbs in Kopači. The problem is that they are being constructed on land owned by Muslims. In April Serb authorities demolished a prominent hotel on the main thoroughfare of Kopači, to be replaced with housing for displaced Serbs. International officials called for a halt to this and other illegal construction, but it is still taking place.

While the March return to Kopači is a breakthrough, the overall movement of two-way return between Kopači and Goražde continues to be sluggish.

The laws are in place for the quick resolution of property claims and for the enforcement of eviction orders. Hundreds of property claims have been submitted and approved on both sides, but the properties are still occupied by displaced people. Some evictions have finally taken place in Goražde, and over 30 homes that were inhabited by Serbs before the war have been evacuated and sealed for the return of their owners.

In late April, the Regional Committee for Refugees of Southeastern Bosnia met with representatives of international organizations to lodge a complaint about the failure to implement property laws and claims decisions. One OSCE officer placed the blame on the Goražde Office of the RS Ministry for Refugees. The officer suggested that the head of this office might be replaced, and that an international supervisor might have to be appointed. But to date, nothing has been done.

In early May, the displaced persons who had returned to Kopači called a protest demonstration in front of the UNHCR office in Goražde. The returnees presented three demands: first, create conditions for them to move into their homes; second, halt the construction of pre-fabricated buildings on Muslim-owned land; and third, establish a multi-ethnic police force in Kopači.

During a recent conversation, Vahid Kanlić characterized the present situation to me as follows: 'We are losing patience and are very disappointed with the process of return as it is currently working. The property laws are an essential element of the implementation of the Dayton agreement, but they are seriously endangered. From the international community, there is an administrative silence on this problem. We met with international officials and requested that the

municipality of Serb Goražde be abolished, and that an international district [like Brčko] be set up there. Meanwhile, the agony of our displacement continues.'

Regional Thaw

While the return to Kopači continues to be blocked, there is movement for the first time in many other parts of the region. Hundreds of people have visited their pre-war homes for the first time, in villages around Foča, Žepa, Višegrad, and other municipalities notorious for their obstruction. After eight years of waiting, more communities of displaced people are taking control of their lives. The potent example of the Goražde tent encampment is spreading.

All of these return efforts are being coordinated and supported by the Regional Committee for Refugees of Southeast Bosnia. Vahid Kanlić, the committee's president, told me that around 150 people have returned to Žepa, one of the 'safe areas' overrun in 1995. A hundred others went back to Rogatica, and the first return to Višegrad has taken place.

Most of these returns are to tent encampments, as the homes destroyed in the war have not yet been rebuilt. In Medjedja, just outside of Višegrad, 50 returned Muslims are living in the shells of burnt-out houses. Returning Muslims have cleaned rubble from their homes in Ustiprača and will start a tent settlement there. An elderly couple returned to a formerly mixed village near Rudo and is living with Serbs there.

Mr. Kanlić estimated that at present there are around ten tent encampments throughout southeast Bosnia, holding approximately 1,000 people. These people are waiting for assistance to rebuild their houses. Meanwhile, they desperately need tents, medications, fuel, and food.

Not all the return is by Muslims to the Republika Srpska. The first mass return of Serbs has taken place to Dubište, a village just a few kilometers outside of Goražde. A tent encampment was set up there in late April, with food provided by the authorities of Muslim-controlled Goražde Canton.

Mr. Kanlić was hopeful that this example will help other displaced Serbs to break away from the destructive control of their leaders. He noted that the number of Serbs who have returned to Goražde town this year is still small, but that it should 'break the ice.'

In the Balance

Like so much of the rest of Bosnia and Herzegovina, southeast Bosnia is now finally on the edge of a breakthrough. In the first days of June, another house in Kopači was opened up to Muslims who had been crammed into two homes for almost three months. But a start is not enough.

One encouraging factor is the election of non-nationalist leaders in some parts of Bosnia. The Social Democratic Party (SDP) won control of the municipality of Goražde, and in late May Mersudin Kožo was inaugurated as mayor. Vahid Kanlić, the refugee leader, expressed the hope that Mr. Kožo's election would lead to a more positive climate for Serb return to Goražde. On the other hand, the new mayor of Serb Goražde appears to be 'from the same circle that took over the

area during the war,' according to Kanlić.

Such is the state of return to southeast Bosnia in the early summer of 2000. The international community is putting huge resources into the reconstruction of Bosnia, but much more is needed in the southeast. I asked Mr. Kanlić whether the international community has offered any help to the new tent encampments that have sprung up around the region. He said, 'No, there has not been a single brick donated for Dubište, for example. Development is very slow and uncertain.'

Return activists of southeast Bosnia like Vahid Kanlić refuse to spend the rest of their lives as 'DPs' (displaced persons). They are pressing forward. But the international community must also play its part if there is to be a significant movement among the 100,000 refugees represented by the Regional Committee for Refugees of Southeast Bosnia.

A hundred here or a hundred there -- would that constitute the start of a true breakthrough, or it could remain merely symbolic? Whatever the answer, it could determine the outcome of this 'year of now or never.'