

# Bosnia and Herzegovina: problems and progress in the return process

by Carl Hallergård

More than half of the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina was displaced by the conflict that ravaged the country from 1992 to 1995. Only 15 per cent have so far returned to their places of origin.

The efforts of the international community are increasingly focused on measures helping the return process. These efforts are urgent, as the continued large-scale displacement is a heavy burden on a country struggling to recover from a particularly violent and destructive conflict. The urgency does not mean, however, that less emphasis should be placed on return to places of origin. Reconciliation and normalisation are more likely to be achieved by the reintegration of shattered communities than by ethnic division and separation.

## Large-scale displacement

The pre-conflict population of Bosnia and Herzegovina was close to 4.3 million. The conflict displaced almost 2.5 million people, of which roughly half sought refuge abroad. At the peak of displacement, Bosnia and Herzegovina had a population consisting of about two million 'remainees', while more than one million were internally displaced. Displacement therefore touched a large part of the population, and most, if not all, regions are currently hosting IDPs in abandoned private or collective accommodation.

Many municipalities include significant numbers of IDPs, in some cases numbering more than half the current population. This of course has political, social and economic consequences.

## The return process

Despite the international community's explicit objective of return of both refugees and IDPs, actual returns have consistently fallen short of expectations. In 1996, UNHCR had foreseen the return of 870,000 persons: 500,000 IDPs and 370,000 refugees. In fact, by the end of 1996, only 88,000 had returned from abroad and 164,000 from inside Bosnia and Herzegovina, bringing the total for 1996 to 252,000.

Even the more modest forecasts for 1997 have proven over-optimistic. Instead of a foreseen 200,000 returns from abroad, estimates in late 1997 were for between 100,000 and

120,000 returns by the end of the year. Still, the repatriation from abroad outnumbers returning IDPs, which by late 1997 amounted to 90,000. Many of the refugees returning from abroad are unable to return to their places of origin, and thus become IDPs instead. The returns that have taken place so far are mainly so-called 'majority returns' [1], either to former front-line areas which again have become safe, or to areas which were transferred from one entity to the other in the Dayton Peace Agreement. These areas include the surroundings of Sarajevo, the area around the former Gorazde enclave, and 'the Anvil', south of Banja Luka, which was handed over to Republika Srpska. Return movements from abroad have been largely concentrated into urban areas (Sarajevo) and the westernmost part of Bosnia, around the city of Bihac.

## Socioeconomic turmoil

The conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina followed a logic of ethnic separatism, between Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats and Muslim



'Bosniacs'. The ethnic differences in the pre-conflict society did not, however, correspond to social, cultural and economic differences within the population. While it is not uncommon in multi-ethnic societies that certain professions and positions are held by

---

*...significant progress in the return process cannot be achieved without minority return*

---

people with specific ethnic origin, this was generally not the case in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although rural villages were often mono-ethnic, neighbouring villages were commonly dominated by differing ethnic groups.

The displacement of more than half of the population and the attempt to reorganise the country along ethnic lines has therefore led to social and economic turmoil. Large urban populations currently find themselves displaced to rural areas, such as the many Serbs that left Sarajevo for Visegrad, Zvornik and Bijelina in eastern Bosnia. At the same time, the

Muslim population in rural eastern Bosnia is currently displaced to Sarajevo and its surroundings, and living in the houses and apartments of the Serb population that left. The different habits, clothing and behaviour of the urban and rural populations currently living side by side is a constant source of hostility. The simultaneous population movements in both directions have led to a socially explosive mixture of urban and rural people in both city and countryside.

Economically, both population groups are outside their natural 'economic habitat' and their skills are not properly utilised. This misfit between skills and situation is probably one of the main reasons for the slow economic recovery.

Furthermore, displaced people constitute an easy target for political manipulation and propaganda. They are frustrated by the hostility of the original population around them and discriminated against by local employers, and displacement is increasingly felt as a profound injustice. Hostility towards the other side is therefore easily drummed up by nationalist politicians, who present ethnic separation and independence as the natural

solution. Paradoxically, internal displacement is also one of the main impediments to the return process. As most displacement is of ethnic origin, significant progress in the return process cannot be achieved without minority return, that is the return of Bosnian Serbs to the Croat-Muslim Federation, of Bosnian Croats and Muslims to Republika Srpska, and of Croats and Muslims within the Federation.

Resistance towards such minority returns is mainly found among those displaced, who not only fear having to leave current accommodation when original home-owners return, but who also oppose the right to return of other ethnic groups when that right is not extended to them. Much of the violence and upheaval that has accompanied attempts at minority return so far is the work of displaced people. On some occasions, political agreement on minority return has been reversed after violent protests by local IDPs.

The continued large-scale displacement is therefore at the root of many of the social, economic and political difficulties that hamper the recovery of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition, the nature of the problems described above is such that without



photograph: Howard Davies

significant progress on minority returns, the risk of political and social unrest is likely to increase.

### **Positive conditionality**

The first important step to assist the return process taken by the international community was in Sintra in June 1997, at the ministerial meeting of the Peace Implementation Council. It was decided to link international assistance efforts at the local level to the acceptance of returns, in particular of minorities.

This 'positive conditionality' is increasingly being implemented. In practice, it means that the rehabilitation of housing, schools, health facilities, water and electricity supplies, as well as programmes of income generation and local capacity building, is

The Serb population left Vogosca just before the transfer, many going to Visegrad in eastern Bosnia. Many of the displaced Muslim families returned to Vogosca after the transfer and there are still empty houses that can be repaired to allow the return of the Serbs. The Muslim Mayor of Vogosca is in favour of the return of the Serbs, as rumours are that the production in the big car factory in Vogosca is about to start again and many of the key engineers and employees were Serbs.

However, the municipality also houses many women and children from Srebrenica and earlier attempts at so-called 'look and see visits' with buses from Visegrad to Vogosca have failed, due to violent protests from the Srebrenica women [2]. Individual visits have been successful, however, and the repair of houses and the return of the first Serb families is underway in a project implemented by the French NGO, Equilibre, and funded by ECHO. Although the returning families feel threatened by the Srebrenica women, their

Muslim neighbours have welcomed them back and promised to give them the necessary protection. They prefer their original Serb neighbours to the women of Srebrenica.

A second example concerns Stolac, south of Mostar. In early 1996 UNHCR, with support from ECHO, initiated one of the first pilot projects of minority return within the Federation. In Stolac, the Muslim and Serb populations had been chased during the conflict by the Bosnian Croat army and their houses had been largely destroyed or were occupied by displaced Croats from central Bosnia. The pilot project included the repair of one hundred destroyed houses for the return of Muslim families displaced to east Mostar.

Throughout 1996 the return was violently opposed by local authorities and IDPs, and even the cleaning out of rubble in the destroyed houses was sabotaged. Political pressure at higher levels did not appear to have an effect.

Then, in the spring of 1997, the attitude changed. The destruction

stopped, and the selected houses could be cleaned out and repaired by a mixed Croat-Muslim work force from Mostar. The one hundred families are now returning to their homes in Stolac, as are additional families outside the project. Incidentally, the return of Serbs to Stolac has also started.

Although it is difficult to refer the change in attitude to a particular cause, the possibility for the displaced Croats to return to their homes in central Bosnia was probably significant. In fact, in Kakanj, a currently Muslim-dominated municipality north-west of Sarajevo, a small project implemented by Comitato di Bergamo and funded by ECHO, foresees the return of displaced Croats, not only from Stolac but also from Capljina and Drvar. The possibility of return has aroused so much interest in Drvar (a city in western Herzegovina with a 90 per cent Serb pre-conflict population and currently an entirely Croat population) that there are high hopes that Serbs from Drvar currently displaced to the Banja Luka area will also be able to return home.

### **Time for change**

These are just two examples of what is almost a countrywide change in attitudes in Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is taking place primarily at municipal level, and does not always correspond to similar political changes at higher levels. Even in Republika Srpska, which remains officially opposed to minority return, possibilities seem to be opening up in the Banja Luka area.

The threat to stability and peace comes not from a reintegration of the three ethnic groups, but from continued large-scale internal displacement. Rapid solutions to the delay in the return process, such as the relocation of returning refugees or the permanent settlement of IDPs in majority areas, will only lead to a blockage of the whole return process. Tensions between the original population and the relocated IDPs will remain high and the willingness of the original minority population to return home will be drastically reduced.

It is therefore crucial that the recent breakthrough is acted upon quickly by the international community, as it holds promise for real political change and normalisation in Bosnia

## *The threat to stability and peace comes not from a reintegration of the three ethnic groups, but from continued large-scale internal displacement.*

made conditional on the acceptance, by the municipality, of the return of minorities.

In part as a consequence of this policy, more and more municipalities are changing their attitude towards the return of minorities, even when higher echelons of political authority (cantonal or entity level governments) still officially oppose such returns. Minority returns are now seen as a way of also improving living conditions for the majority population, which otherwise remains without such assistance. The number of minority returns is still limited, but the political importance of this breakthrough should not be underestimated. A couple of examples illustrate both the change and also the remaining difficulties.

### **Two examples**

Reference was made above to the displacement of Serbs from Sarajevo to eastern Bosnia, and of Muslims from eastern Bosnia to Sarajevo. Vogosca is one of the suburbs of Sarajevo which was transferred to the Muslim-Croat Federation in the Dayton agreement.

and Herzegovina. The temptation to choose alternative solutions, however attractive they may seem in the short run, should be resisted.

***Carl Hallergård is Desk Officer for Bosnia and Herzegovina in the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) in Brussels.***

This article is based on the experience of the European Community Humanitarian Office (ECHO) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which supports the return process and in particular the return of minority populations. The opinions expressed, however, are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views and policies of the office.

Source: UNHCR 'Information notes - Bosnia and Herzegovina, No 12/96 - 2/97 December 1996/February 1997', p2, published by UNHCR Office of the Special Envoy to former Yugoslavia.

Notes

[1] In the case of 'majority returns' returnees are of the same ethnic group as the majority of the current population in the area to which they are returning. 'Minority returns', conversely, are those in which returnees will be in a minority, as an ethnic group, within the current population of the area to which they are returning.

[2] An estimated 7,000 people, largely men and boys, are still missing following massacres in eastern Bosnia by the Bosnian Serb army.