
**INTERNATIONAL
HELSINKI
FEDERATION FOR
HUMAN RIGHTS**

**IHF Fact-finding mission to Eastern Bosnia
(Area of the municipalities of Goražde and Foca)
9 – 11 April 2001**

An IHF fact-finding mission in eastern Bosnia (Goražde / BiH Federation and Foca / Republika Srpska) was undertaken on 9-11 April 2001.¹ Its aim was to gain insight into the state of human rights, with special emphasis on the return of refugees and displaced persons.

Our general estimate was that the process of return to the places of the regions of Foca and Goražde has improved. Still, the number of returning refugees and displaced persons is far from being satisfactory. It is evident that without a greater engagement of domestic institutions and local authorities, as well as of the international community - primarily donor-organizations - better quality results cannot be achieved. The kind of problems that returnees are faced with changed from being a predominantly security related one, to one of a more multidimensional nature. The returned refugees told our team that their main problems are about the education of their children, missing employment possibilities, problems related to health care, pensions and disabled persons insurance, if one moves either from the BiH Federation to Republika Srpska or the other way round. In order to make the return sustainable, it is not enough to reconstruct the damaged or destroyed houses, but it is necessary to invest in the local economy in order to provide jobs, as well as in agricultural machinery for returnees who are returning to rural places.

There are still some unnecessary administrative measures that obstruct the return of refugees. For example the municipal administration taxes for issuing some documents needed for the regulation of their return, such as birth certificates, land certificates, or cadastre certificates², are quite high.

1. Region of Goražde (BiH Federation)

The process of return of (mainly) Serb refugees to the municipality of Goražde is going on, both to the city of Goražde and to the rural parts of the municipality. The overwhelming majority of these cases are elderly persons, while their children stay abroad or in other parts of BiH, mostly in Republika Srpska.

According to the official data, 30% of the apartments in the city of Goražde have been returned to their pre-war occupants of Serb nationality, and there is no case of double occupancy in the municipality of Goražde any longer.

A major unsolved, and even untackled, problem relates to socially owned apartments or houses that were destroyed during the war. For example in Goražde there are in total 112 families who had lived in such apartments before the war and cannot return now, because nobody is undertaking the reconstruction of such houses, or the construction of new apartment houses for such families.³

¹ The team of the mission was composed of the representatives of the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights, the Norwegian Helsinki Committee, Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Republika Srpska and the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

² The cadastre certificate costs for example 120 DEM.

³ International organizations are investing only in those private objects, where ownership relations have been solved, and the canton and municipality have not yet started to do something in this respect.

In the rural areas of the municipality of Goražde, there are 44 tent settlements with Serb returnees, who are cleaning their houses and preparing them for reconstruction and return. These tent settlements are being regularly visited by police patrols to give them a feeling of security, and so far no incidents were registered. Also the representatives of the canton and the municipality have visited the returnees already several times.

Our team visited the settlement of Dubište, which is a few kilometers from Goražde, and which was one of the first tent settlements, starting in the summer of last year. In the meantime 17 houses of Serb returnees have been reconstructed and the reconstructions of another 23 houses are in process.⁴ The returnees are in general satisfied with the security situation, and in this case not only elderly persons are coming back. Problems that were mentioned to us are that there is no street lighting⁵, no potable water, no local medical center, no local transportation to Cajnice (16 km away) in RS.⁶ Also, there are problems with the school attendance of their children.

The economic situation in the municipality of Goražde is more than hard. Nearly all the factories, where a great number of people worked before the war, are either closed or on the other side of the “interethnic boundary line”, or both. During the last two years the international community invested little in this municipality, but according to its mayor, more significant assistance is expected in this year.

2. Region of Srpsko Goražde (Republika Srpska)

The municipality of Srpsko Goražde⁷, on the territory of Republika Srpska (RS), became somewhat famous, because the High Representative in BiH removed not less than two mayors, while a third one resigned.⁸ The new mayor recently officially stated, for the first time at such a level, that there are indeed Serb displaced persons in Srpsko Goražde, who want to return to Goražde.⁹

The return of Bosniaks to Srpsko Goražde is very slow. The authorities claim that they do not have alternative accommodation for Serbs, presently living in Bosniak houses. Twenty pre-fabricated houses were constructed in order to serve as alternative accommodation, but these houses have not yet necessary infrastructures like electricity, water, and sewage, and it is also claimed by Bosniak returnees that these houses were built on their land. They see in those houses a means for the obstruction of the process of return, carried out by the local authorities.

The greatest number of returns of Bosniak refugees in the area of Srpsko Goražde took place in the local community of Kopaci.¹⁰ Kopaci was the industrial zone of Goražde before the war, with a wire-factory, a machinery factory, cold storage and distribution centers, but none of these factories is in function today. Ten families got their whole property back; another ten

⁴ DRA (Dutch Reconstructing Agency) is the main agency for donations for reconstruction. The returnees criticized the work of the donor agencies, because of criteria applied when selecting houses to repair, i.e. that there is only support given, if the houses are very close to the main street.

⁵ This is the case although there are all necessary fittings

⁶ In Cajnice there are at the moment the biggest number of Serb displaced persons from this region.

⁷ According to the data of the Regional Centre for Return Goražde there were 3.662 Bosniaks and 720 Serbs living in Kopaci before the war. At present, 1,000 Serbs make the population of this place, most of them having a refugee status.

⁸ The reason was in each case the non-implementation of the property laws.

⁹ Before it was always denied by any representative of the municipality that any Serb would want to go back from Srpsko Goražde to, for example, Goražde. Obviously they feared that any returning Serb displaced person from Srpsko Goražde would give the possibility for a Bosniak to return to Srpsko Goražde. There were some indications about different ways of putting pressure on those community members who would not accept this.

¹⁰ In addition to local community of Kopaci, the return started in other local communities of the municipality of Srpsko Goražde as well. 15 people returned to the local community Zapljevac, ten to local community Hubjeri, four in local community Brijest, two to local community Ustipraca, 14 to local community Potkozara and two to local community Ogleceva.

families partly regained possession of their property, while 28 families moved into new houses built with the assistance of international donors. The returnees stressed the problem of local transportation, since 18 children returnees go to school in Goražde.

One month ago, the last incident to take place was registered: three young men of Serb nationality had beaten up one seventeen-year old boy, a Bosniak returnee. The police filed criminal charges against the three perpetrators, but the court trial has not yet finished. It is interesting to note, that Zoran Mandic, the head of the police in Foca, told us that the co-operation with the police in Goražde was very good, while his police does have much worse co-operation with the authorities in Srpsko Goražde, where there were several attacks on Bosniak houses.

A positive example regarding the return of Bosniaks to this municipality seems to be the village of Cajnice, where, as we were told by the Regional Center for Return¹¹, about 1,500 returnees live in 45 tent settlements and where the cooperation with the mayor, Njegoš Tepeš, is very good.

An especially interesting tent settlement is in the village of Miljanovici (RS), which is the first multi-ethnic settlement in BiH. Bosniaks, Serbs, and even some Albanians are living together. According to the Regional Center, no assistance has arrived to this settlement so far.

3. The region of Foca / Srbinje (Republika Srpska)¹²

During the year 2000 and in the beginning of 2001, 280 houses were reconstructed in the municipality of Foca¹³, and about 500 Bosniak families have returned.

According to the mayor of the municipality of Foca, Nedjeljko Pavlovic, the municipality does not have the means to provide for temporary accommodation for persons who have to be evicted in order to give back houses or flats to their previous owners. The municipality has asked foreign donors for funding to reconstruct the so-called "Singles Home and Administration Building" in Miljevina with 25 apartments in order to provide accommodation to evicted persons, and is waiting for their decision.

The first return of Bosniak returnees to Foca took place on 25.11.2000 in the settlement of Donje Polje. In this settlement, five houses got a new roof and one floor was added. Later, five more houses were covered and at present there are 25 mainly elderly people living in these houses.¹⁴ The complete infrastructure (water, electricity, sewage system and telephone) as provided for the settlement by the municipality.

No cases of attacks on returnees have been registered.¹⁵ The returnees to whom we spoke to, felt safe. Also here the police¹⁶ is regularly visiting the returnees' settlements in order to give them a feeling of security. What the returnees demanded was that a local bus line be established between Foca and Goražde, a request which the municipal authorities had rejected, stating that they do not have an adequate bus. Also mentioned by the returnees, and of course by the mayor, was the bad economic situation of Foca. As in Goražde, we were told

¹¹ The Regional Center for Return Goražde was established to assist both Bosniak and Serb returnees, mainly by distributing donations to them. They deem that in general the process of return to this region is not followed by adequate logistics (insufficient building material, hygienic packages, etc...).

¹² There are 22,800 people living in the municipality of Foca. 5,660 persons have the status of refugees.

Presently there are 557 families displaced from Sarajevo, 422 from Ustikolina, 132 from Goražde and 180 from other places.

¹³ The returns took place in the places of Donje Polje (located in the city), Miljevina, Jelec, Kratina, Kozja Luka. Returns to Gornje Polje, Jošanica, Tjentište, Brod and Cohodar Mahala have been announced.

¹⁴ The German agency CIMIC reconstructed the roofs, while IRC contributed the interiors. UNHCR periodically submits parcels with food.

¹⁵ There were some minor incidents in Miljevina: a tombstone to Serb soldiers and a tombstone at the Muslim cemetery were damaged. On several occasions, cattle were killed in the place Kozja Luka, a timber was placed on the road, at the very beginning of returns.

¹⁶ There are two full-time Bosniak policemen in Foca..

about the difficulties in the health care for returnees. Because of not being included in the health insurance system of Republika Srpska, a Bosniak family who had returned to Foca would have had to pay 600 DEM for a serum that they needed for their child, bitten by a snake, which they simply could not afford.



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