

conference has been made repeatedly.⁴⁸ This insistence has been coupled with assertions that the authorities have not been fully meeting their undertakings. The UNHCR spokesman, Andrej Mahecic, reported in October 1998 that Serbs are in an unequal position as regards the return of property and reconstruction aid, and that the government had not fulfilled its obligation within three months to amend legislation so as to equalise the status of all returnees, Serb as well as Croat.⁴⁹

As feared at the time of the returns programme's adoption, when the programme was presented as part of a wider document, including an assessment of reconstruction costs, the authorities have repeatedly expressed expectations that substantial aid pledges will come out of the reconstruction conference (frequently, and misleadingly, referred to in Croatia as a donors' conference). For example, Radic has pointed out that if the \$2.5 billion he estimates will be required to implement the remainder of the reconstruction programme has to come entirely out of the government's budget, then it will take another five years.⁵⁰ The pro-government media has explicitly drawn a link between receipt of international aid and implementation of the returns programme, suggesting that the latter is dependent on the former.⁵¹

Despite international reservations about implementation of the returns programme, the international community has accepted the reconstruction programme as satisfactory.⁵² The programme sets as its target the reintegration of another 200,000-240,000 returnees. It includes a detailed budget, envisaging expenditure of \$500 million per year over five years, and expresses the hope that international help will be forthcoming. The reconstruction conference has now been scheduled for December 1998.

It seems unlikely, however, that significant international funding will be made available, and highly likely, given the authorities' oft-repeated attempts to link international aid with implementation of the returns programme, that the government will seek to present this as an excuse for slow progress on returns. Such a linkage must not be permitted. The record has shown that when the Croatian authorities have seen it as being a strategic Croat goal to carry out construction work, then the funding is there. This has, for example, been the case in the construction of housing for Bosnian Croat DPs in areas of Bosnia such as Mostar, Capljina and Stolac. International insistence that reconstruction assistance for Serb returnees to Croatia must be available, without discrimination, should be maintained, and not be made conditional on levels of international aid.

⁴⁸ For example, by Mark Thompson at an OSCE press conference, *Jutarnji list*, 22 October 1998.

⁴⁹ OSCE and UNHCR press conference, HINA, 7 October 1998. In its response to the OSCE's October 1998 paper on the returns process, the government undertook to consult with the international community over which legislation needed to be amended.

⁵⁰ Cited by HINA, 13 October 1998.

⁵¹ For example, a commentary by Marko Barisic in *Vjesnik*, 9 October 1998.

⁵² The programme, entitled *Continuing Programme for the Reconstruction of War-Affected Settlements*, prepared by the Ministry of Development and Reconstruction, dated October 1998, received support from the international community through the Article 11 Commission, which was formed following the Erdut agreement, on 27 October, 1998. The announcement by the Article 11 Commission nevertheless expressed its continuing concern at the uneven implementation of the returns programme.