

#### IV. INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE

Agreement on the programme for returns of refugees and IDPs came only after considerable delay, disagreement and international pressure. The larger proportion of Serb refugees from Croatia is in the FRY, estimated by the UNHCR at some 270,000. A smaller number, estimated at 30,000-35,000, is in Bosnia.<sup>19</sup> Progress in securing the return of members of the Serb minority to Croatia had, up until the adoption of the returns programme, been modest. According to the UNHCR in Zagreb, citing ODP data, as of 23 June 1998, 21,134 Serb refugees had returned to Croatia from the FRY and Bosnia (mostly from the former). The ODP acknowledges that many of those who had up until then returned from the FRY to Croatia were in fact people who had already obtained Croatian papers during UNTAES, who had left Croatia, and whose return had been relatively simple given that they already possessed the necessary documents. For those who have not already obtained Croatian documents, the procedure for doing so has proved a major obstacle, reducing the numbers of returnees. In any case, the OSCE, in its September 1998 report, expressed scepticism as to the ODP's returns figures, which it considers inflated.

International pressure on the Croatian authorities to allow Serb refugees to return to Croatia has increased in 1998. The late Croatian Defence Minister, Gojko Susak, in talks with the US Defence Secretary in January 1998, committed Croatia to coming up with procedures for the return of refugees to Croatia by mid-March 1998. These procedures were to cover such matters as the verification of citizenship and obtaining of entry documents. Further, by the end of March 1998, the authorities were to present proposals on measures needed to facilitate returns, covering such issues as property rights and the reconstruction of damaged properties. Croatia failed to honour either promise. In late April 1998 a document on the procedures for returns was issued.<sup>20</sup> However, this failed to satisfy international concerns, particularly because it required potential returnees to re-apply for citizenship, rather than just affirming citizenship.

International pressure for more satisfactory proposals forced Croatia to postpone a reconstruction conference (from which the government is hoping for substantial pledges of aid), from April 1998, to July, then to October. The conference is now set for December 1998. In addition, the European Union has continued to put off extending the PHARE aid programme to Croatia, from which the country has been excluded since the Croatian military offensives in 1995, which led to the mass exodus of most of the Serb population of the formerly Serb-held territories.<sup>21</sup> The possibility of the European Union suspending Croatia's preferential trade status has also been mooted.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> These figures are provided by the UNHCR in Croatia.

<sup>20</sup> *Procedure For Individual Return of Persons Who Have Abandoned Croatia*, April 27 1998.

<sup>21</sup> Following reports that the European Commission had again in October 1998 judged that Croatia had failed to satisfy international conditions, in particular concerning the return of refugees, the foreign minister, Mate Granic and the Croatian ambassador to the European Union, Janko Vranyczany-Dobrinovic, both concluded that Croatia's inclusion in the PHARE programme was still a long way off, HINA 19 October 1998 and *Jutarnji list*, 29 October 1998.

<sup>22</sup> Reuters reported that the EU external affairs commissioner, Hans Van den Broek had linked refugee returns with the continuation of Croatia's EU trade privileges, 30 July 1998.