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THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

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The Human Rights situation in Croatia, although marginally better this year, is still a serious concern, particularly as regards the treatment of the Serb minority and freedom of expression.

BACKGROUND

Generally speaking, human rights of the average ethnic Croatian citizen are typically respected by the Government. There are, however, very real concerns, mostly in connection with the rights of the Serb minority, media freedom, electoral processes, property rights (especially for Serbs) and good governance, among others.

There has been a decrease in the number of violent human rights violations against the remaining Serb population, due partly to an increase in the local police presence and the vigilance of the international community. However, incidents continue to take place and reports continue to be received of discrimination and ill-treatment practiced against Croatian Serbs throughout the country, particularly in sectors retaken during operations Storm and Lightning - be it by withholding of public services such as electricity, water or by bureaucratic harassment. However, there are signs that this is beginning to wane.

Although the Croatian Government claims to have moved very strongly to punish those responsible for committing such offenses, little enforcement has taken place. Even if investigations lead to criminal proceedings, the judiciary's freedom and independence is questioned by a number of human rights organizations.

There is concern over the security and welfare of the Croatian Serb population remaining in Krajina and Eastern Slavonia, particularly as the United Nations Transitional Administration (UNTAES) withdraws from the region in January 1998, to be replaced with a UN Civilian Police presence and an expanded OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe) presence in the rest of the country. The optimism spurred by the passage of the long-awaited Amnesty Law in September 1996, has been dispelled by cases of rearrests of people who were released following the law's enactment. Equally, concerns continue to be expressed that the issuance of Croatian documents to Serbs wishing to remain in Eastern Slavonia is still an unnecessarily slow and opaque process. Without Croatian documents, people cannot exercise their pension rights, nor for that matter, property rights.

Croatia is making progress towards democracy, but the democratic rights are still below accepted OSCE standards. OSCE observers at the presidential elections held on June 15, in which President Tudjman was re-elected, characterized the elections as "free but not fair". There are serious concerns about the extent to which constitutional power is concentrated in the hands of the President.

Croatia still supports Bosnian Croats who favour dividing Bosnia and Herzegovina along ethnic lines and who continue to maintain the elements of the so-called independent "Republic of