



BREAKING THE LOGJAM: REFUGEE RETURNS TO CROATIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As winter approaches in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Bosnia), conditions for refugee returns to that country become increasingly difficult. In neighbouring Croatia, by contrast, the weather is generally milder so that, given political will, refugees should be able to return to their homes throughout the winter months. Moreover, the Croatian government is organising a reconstruction conference next month, at which it hopes to obtain pledges of international support to help rebuild its war-damaged country. Many refugees from Croatia are Serbs -- of whom some 300,000 now reside in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Republika Srpska -- who fled previously Serb-held regions of Croatia in the wake of the Croatian Army's 1995 military offensives.

The position Croatia's Serbs has long been contentious. Croat nationalists have often seen the Croatian Serbs as a Trojan Horse that has been used to undermine Croatia, with the aim of carving out pieces of Croatian territory and joining them to a Greater Serbian state. In communist times there was widespread Croat resentment at perceived advantages afforded to Serbs in Croatian party bodies and institutions. Serbs for their part derived many advantages from Croatia's inclusion in Yugoslavia, which placed them in a wider union bringing together Serb communities throughout Yugoslavia. The nationalist euphoria with which most Croats greeted the assertion of Croatian sovereignty and independence in 1990-91 caused anxiety and insecurity among Serbs which, manipulated by the Serbian leadership in Belgrade, led to an armed rebellion in regions in which Serbs formed a significant proportion of the population, and the expulsion of most Croats from those regions. Croatia's reconquest of most of those regions in 1995 met with international disapproval, due to the mass Serb exodus which it prompted and widespread atrocities against the few who remained.

Following the 1995 offensives, the Erdut Agreement was signed on the peaceful reintegration of the last Serb-controlled region, in Eastern Slavonia (the Croatian Danube region). After a transitional UN administration, the region reverted to Zagreb's full control in January 1998. During the transitional period Serbs in the region, both pre-war residents and displaced persons (DPs) from other parts of Croatia, were able to acquire Croatian documents. However, the reintegration process has not proceeded smoothly. Few Croats have returned, and the condition of Serbs remains difficult, with widespread intimidation, violence and discrimination forcing many to leave Croatia.