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REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

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The human rights situation in Croatia is slowly improving, but areas of particular concern remain, a number of which involve the treatment of the Serb minority (both domiciled and displaced).

BACKGROUND

Croatia's membership in the Council of Europe and its strong desire to join European and Atlantic institutions have a positive influence on the Government of Croatia and the attitudes of many Croatian opinion leaders and decision makers. However, the lack of a genuine democratic tradition, vestiges of the communist legacy and bitter memories of the recent conflict involving Serbs have created a petri dish in which a human rights culture is developing only with some difficulty. In general, the human rights of the average ethnic Croat citizen are respected by the government. The same cannot be said of the minority ethnic Serb population. Much attention focused on Eastern Slavonia in 1998 following the departure of the United Nations Transitional Administration in Eastern Slavonia (UNTAES) in January. A mass exodus of Serbs from the area was predicted, but did not materialize. The policing function of UNTAES was transferred initially to a UN Civilian Police presence, then to OSCE police monitors complemented by an expanded OSCE presence throughout Croatia.

During 1998, there has been a noticeable decrease in the number of violent attacks on the Serb population in Eastern Slavonia, due partly to an increase in the local police presence and the ongoing vigilance of the international community. However, constant low-level harassment, punctuated by occasional violent incidents, continue, as does a small but steady stream of departures by ethnic Serbs. There is little evidence to bear out the government's claim to have moved strongly to punish the perpetrators of violent incidents. Even if investigations lead to criminal proceedings, there appears to be little judicial follow on. The international community expressed concern throughout 1998 to the Croatian government over the ongoing departures of ethnic Serbs. The situation is complicated by the lack of economic opportunity in the area. Economic development and the return of refugees and displaced persons is also hampered by the presence of land mines in many of the areas to be resettled.

In other parts of the country, reports continue to be received of discrimination and incidents of ill-treatment against Croatian Serbs, particularly in the sectors that were retaken during military operations Flash and Storm. Local authorities have withheld electricity and water, or engaged in other forms of bureaucratic harassment. The central government has shown greater cooperation in trying to discourage this type of local discrimination. Legal issues relating to restitution of property and occupancy rights remain unresolved. While the ethnic Serb minority bears the brunt of discrimination in Croatia, other national minorities, notably Muslim Croats, ethnic Italians and Romanians also suffer from incidents of discrimination, and report difficulties with obtaining documents such as passports and land titles, and lack of access to governmental positions.