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THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

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The human rights situation in Croatia remains of concern. In particular, there continue to be problems in the treatment of the ethnic Serb minority living in Croatia or wishing to return to former homes in that country.

BACKGROUND

There have been positive developments in Croatia over the past year, including the normalization of relations with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and the recently adopted amnesty and media laws. The urgent humanitarian needs of vulnerable persons are now better addressed. Croatia's membership in the Council of Europe, and the obligation this entails to uphold the highest standards of human rights, should have a positive impact on the respect for human rights in that country. However, the Special Rapporteur of the UN's Commission on Human Rights continues to express concern over the security and welfare of the Croatian Serb population, particularly in the Krajina region and in Eastern Slavonia.

Although there has been a slight decrease in the number of violent human rights abuses against the ethnic Serb population in Croatia, due partly to an increase in local police presence, incidents of threats and actual assault continue to occur. As well, reports are received of non-violent discrimination practiced against Croatian Serbs throughout the country - be it the withholding of public services, such as electricity, or bureaucratic harassment. The Croatian government claims to have moved strongly to punish those responsible for committing such offenses, but little enforcement appears to have taken place. The optimism spurred by the passage of the long-awaited amnesty law, in September 1996, has been affected by cases of rearrests of people released following the law's enactment. Concern continues to be expressed that the issuance of Croatian documents to Serbs wishing to remain in Eastern Slavonia is still an unnecessarily slow and oblique process.

Problematic too is the lack of progress on Croatian Serb refugee returns. The UN Security Council has urged Croatia to adopt a comprehensive approach to facilitate the return of refugees originating from that country to their homes of origin. Croatia has been criticized for its continued failure to safeguard the property rights of refugees.

In other areas, there is concern that the Croatian government seeks to censure criticism and dissent. Of particular note was the government's attempt to revoke the licence of independent Radio 101. Although the government reversed its position when thousands of Croatians took to the streets in protest, the incident suggested that the government still has some way to go in terms of freedom of the media. Also, there have been reports of international organizations, and Croatian ones with international affiliations, being the target of harassment. On war crimes, there is concern that the Croatian government is withholding full cooperation by failing to apprehend indicted persons believed to be in the country.