REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
Human Dimension Implementation Meeting
Warsaw, 30 September – 8 October 2010
Working Session 6: Humanitarian issues and other commitments

S T A T E M E N T
by

Commissariat for Refugees of the Republic of Serbia

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Return and Durable Solutions of Refugees

Warsaw, 05 October 2010

Respected Mr. Chairman,
Ladies and Gentleman,

I would like to take this opportunity to present you with the latest figures on refugees and internally displaced persons in Serbia, their problems and most of all our efforts in resolving their situation.

The Republic of Serbia is a country with the highest number of refugees and internally displaced persons in Europe. There are 80.000 refugees living in Serbia today, out of these as high as 75 per cent are from the Republic of Croatia. Reductions in the number of refugees over the past 18 years from some half a million persons at the outset is a result mainly attributable to the integration process in the Republic of Serbia. The process of Return was implemented with varying success in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

On the territory of the Republic of Serbia live some 210.000 internally displaced persons from Kosovo and Metohija. This figure together with the aforementioned refugees brings the total number of vulnerable persons to almost 300.000. The return of the displaced to the autonomous province of Kosovo and Metohija following ten years since the arrival of the international forces is still more or less symbolic.

Serbia firmly believes, as one of the countries in Europe with protracted refugee situation that unimpeded access to rights both in the country of refuge and the country of origin including the restoration or fair settlement for all individual acquired rights is crucial for finding durable solutions. Data on voluntary return and successful integration reflect a direct connection between reducing the numbers of refugees and the fact that their rights in the country of origin are available and fully restored. Therefore, in order to achieve sustainable return and sustainable integration it is more than necessary that the country of origin and the country of refuge cooperate since this is the only way to overcome the protracted refugee situation.

With this in mind Serbia has initiated the organization of the regional ministerial conference in Belgrade on the 25th of March of this year with the aim of ensuring comprehensive and durable solutions for refugees.

At the conference ministers for foreign affairs of four countries – Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia – agreed on the need for further cooperation, exchange of data and improvement of the process of return and integration. They also confirmed the importance of accessing the rights of refugees in both their country of origin and their country of integration and stressed that problems of the refugee population living in collective centers and those who are the most vulnerable have to be solved as a matter of priority. The efforts of the countries participating were also supported by a joint declaration made by international organizations; precisely: the European Union, UNHCR, OSCE and Council of Europe.

At the follow-up process after the conference a series of regional meetings was conducted with the aim of developing a regional project on solving the problems of those considered as being the most vulnerable. All four participating countries have

produced proposals of their national projects in cooperation with UNHCR which were summarized in the Regional project for solving the problems of the most vulnerable persons. This project, as the first step of a wider process with the aim of a comprehensive and fair solution of the refugee chapter in the region, will be presented to the international community, including donors, with a view to commence preparations for the donor conference.

Bilateral technical meetings between the Republic of Croatia and the Republic of Serbia were held with the goal of an exchange of data for determining the needs of this population and finding adequate solutions for open questions such as seized tenancy rights, pensions and other questions listed in the non-paper. Both sides have fulfilled their obligations regarding the exchange of data on status issues. We are still waiting on the Croatian data concerning the total number of tenancy rights since only through the exchange of this reliable and verified data from the country of origin it will be possible to consider the size of the needs and consequently to suggest the adequate mechanisms for their solutions.

Despite the fact that so far some progress has been achieved in terms of regional cooperation we still have to make further efforts in order that we might find comprehensive and optimal solution for the remaining open questions. We are using this opportunity to again express our willingness in seeking to find the optimal solutions for the problems of refugees who reside on the territory of Serbia, both those who would like to return to their country of origin and those who would like to remain in Serbia, through cooperation with our neighbors in the regional process. The Republic of Serbia remains open for the consideration of all proposals for solving these open questions.

To conclude, Mr. Chairman, allow me to stress that Serbia exerts enormous efforts in attempting to provide assistance to refugees and internally displaced persons despite the difficulties it experiences as a consequence of transitional economy. Unfortunately the needs are huge and they require comprehensive and essential solutions but the burden of solving the refugee crisis can not and must not remain only on the shoulders of the Republic of Serbia. We believe that we will be able to close the refugee chapter, which has lasted far too long, and achieve stability within the region only through the consistent fulfillment of obligations by all the actors and with the necessary assistance of the international community.

Thank you.