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Interview with the Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia Jorge Fuentes

Interviewed by: Zoran Radosavljevic

Croatia must make more efforts to try its own war crimes suspects and help Serb war refugees return home before joining the European Union, a top Western human rights monitor said on Monday. "In terms of human rights and civil society, Croatia is not yet prepared to join the European Union, but in four years it will be," said Jorge Fuentes, who heads the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) in Croatia. The OSCE is a pan-European human rights watchdog. "But Croatia needs to make more efforts in two main issues -- the return of refugees and war crimes trials. Those are two areas that are insufficient. Others are a matter of how perfect you want Croatia to be," he told Reuters in an interview. He said local courts must do their best to conduct "correct trials" of Croatian generals whose war crimes cases have been transferred to the local judiciary from the U.N. war crimes tribunal in The Hague. The trials have yet to start. Croatia opened EU membership talks last October and said it wanted to complete them in time to join in 2009 or 2010, quoting its relatively strong economy and civil society. Fuentes said that, although there were many 'minor' limitations in human rights, like participation of women in business and politics, "in some respects, police, media, civil society, Croatia is more or less like EU countries".

RETURN OF SERB REFUGEES

He said the government of Prime Minister Ivo Sanader had the political will to facilitate the return of Serb refugees, most of whom fled to Serbia during a 1995 Croatian army offensive against their rebel 'republic' of Krajina. According to OSCE data, some 120,000 Serbs of an estimated 350,000 who left Croatia have returned to their homes so far. Fuentes said a few more thousand might return following a Croat media campaign in December that invited refugees to come home. "Now, there are only some 70,000 refugees left in Serbia who have not integrated or gone to third countries and are perhaps willing to go back. We have to see how many will apply but the reality is -- I don't suppose there will be a massive return. We expect a few thousand will return," he said. However, he praised Zagreb for budgeting some 2.5 billion kuna (\$410.4 million) per year in the next three years for the reconstruction of Serb houses. "It's a tremendous effort. Croatia has the political will. As it negotiates with the EU, it must have a good record." "If Croatia joins the EU around 2010, which is a realistic time, by that time, I believe the problem of refugees should be resolved," Fuentes said, but urged the authorities to work on improving tolerance and reconciliation. "Ten years after the war (ethnic) incidents still happen and perpetrators are hardly ever found. This has to be resolved".