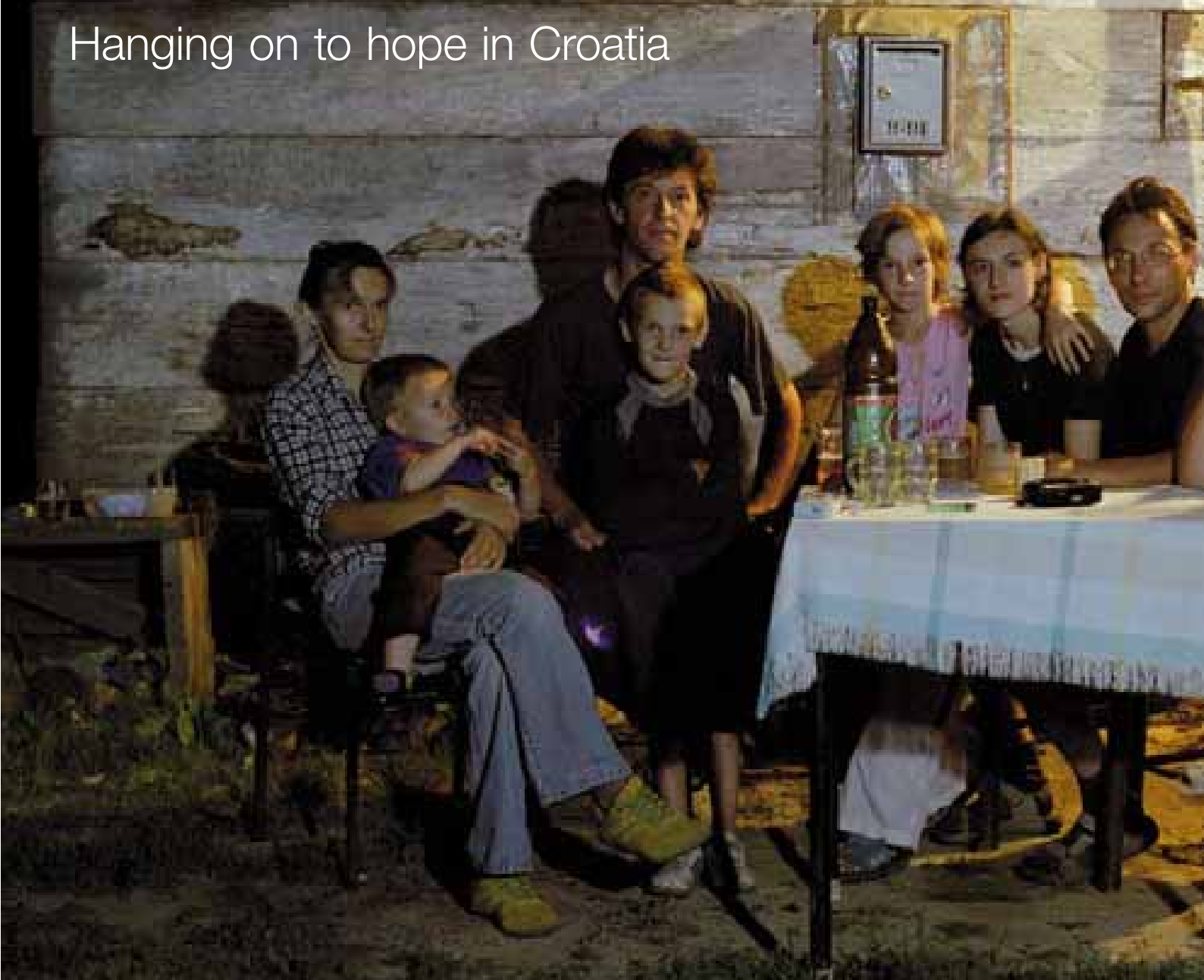


Home at last

Hanging on to hope in Croatia



BY IVOR PRICKETT

As I stepped off the bus at Karlovac central bus station after a three-hour ride from Knin in southern Croatia, a slight 29-year-old man with a hunched posture and wire-rimmed glasses, greeted me with a hearty handshake. His name was Nebojsa.

We piled into his little blue Yugo and began to trundle our way out of the city.

Or so I thought, until we practically started flying down the main road while Nebojsa, using his best English, told me the story of his life.

It was the beginning of an intriguing ten-day stay with Nebojsa and his small family as part of a project funded by the OSCE Mission to Croatia, aimed at giving the issue of returns a human face.

In the course of one month in the middle



Slavica and Nebojsa Eremic (centre) are surrounded by a strong network of close friends who are practically family.

of summer this year, I lived in four different households in central and southern Croatia, documenting the lives of a cross-section of Serb returnees who were going through various stages of resettlement and reintegration.

When we reached Nebojsa's cottage in Jurga, a tiny, closely-knit village just outside the town of Vojnic in central Croatia, my host introduced me to his 21-year-old wife, Slavica. They led me proudly to ten-month-old Nikola, who was sleeping peacefully. Peering into the cot, Nebojsa whispered: "My Nikola and my Slavica are my whole life." He would tell me this again and again during my stay.

Nebojsa told me that he and his younger brother had grown up in Jurga. In August 1995, they and their parents were among an estimated 200,000 people who fled to Serbia to escape the hatred and violence of "Operation Storm".

In the family's absence, the abandoned house became a convenient shelter for a Bosnian refugee and his two children. Nebojsa's father rushed back to Jurga to regain ownership of the house. When he finally managed to do so, with the help of the OSCE Mission, he sold the property immediately and rejoined his family in Serbia.

After two years as a refugee near the city of Novi-Sad in Serbia, Nebojsa decided to go back to Croatia and live with his grandmother. After her death and despite his father's offer of a flat in Serbia to lure him back, he continued to hang on to his grandmother's 20-square-metre, two-room cottage.

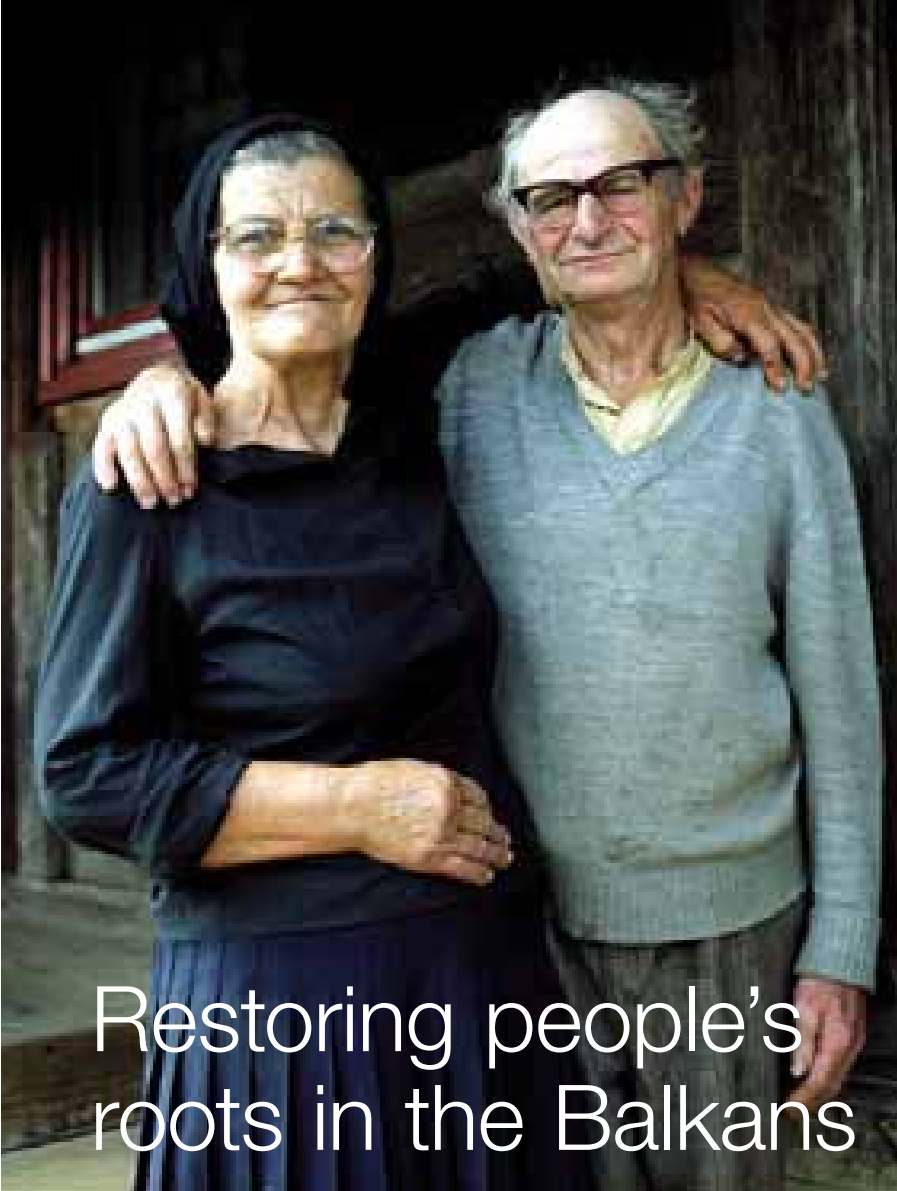
It was to be another two years until Nebojsa met Slavica, an ethnic Croat from the nearby city of Karlovac. Slavica's parents were unhappy with her decision to marry a struggling young Serb returnee. The couple told me about a family row that led to the police confiscating a gun from Slavica's father.

Unemployment is rife among the returnee community. Because of ill health and lack of tools and equipment, Nebojsa is not even able to take on casual work as a farm hand or manual worker. The family survives on a modest monthly subsidy from the State.

In spite of their share of trials and tribulations, Nebojsa and Slavica have decided to remain together in Jurga. Against all odds, they have succeeded in fully integrating themselves into the community. Not a single day passed without someone dropping in to say hello or without us driving off together in the Yugo to visit friends nearby.

Recently, Nebojsa phoned me in Newport, South Wales, to say that he would start doing what he could to rebuild their dilapidated, poorly insulated home despite his meagre funds. He was confident that any slight improvements in their surroundings would go a long way towards restoring a semblance of normalcy to their lives.

Not every returnee I met possessed Nebojsa's inner strength and resolve. I have no doubt that these will serve him well as he carves out a life for himself, Slavica and Nikola in their little slice of Croatia.



OSCE MISSION TO CROATIA / IVOR PRICKETT

Restoring people's roots in the Balkans

In January 2005, the Governments of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and the former Serbia and Montenegro signed a regional ministerial declaration in Sarajevo together with the European Union, the OSCE and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) committing themselves to an ambitious goal: to resolve all outstanding refugee and international displacement cases throughout the region by the end of 2006. The Governments were to draft national “road maps”, later to be combined into a regional matrix, addressing all the tasks needed to facilitate the completion of the process of refugee return and integration. Early this year, the parties to the agreement met again to review progress made, acknowledging the “entire complexity” of the process. The following contributions from the field describe some of these complexities.

CROATIA: DIGNIFIED RETURN IS CORE CHALLENGE

An estimated 300,000 Croatian citizens of Serbian nationality left Croatia during or right after the 1991-1995 conflict.

In 1997, the mandate of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, first set out in 1996, was extended to include “assisting and monitoring the implementation of Croatian legislation and international commitments on the two-way return of all refugees and displaced persons and on protection of their rights”. Since then, the

Near the village of Tremusnjak in Sisak Moslavina, Croatia. Maria and Velko Eic returned to their wooden house in 2002 and are still desperately in need of electricity.

Mission has been working with the Croatian Government to enable those refugees who wish to return to do so under acceptable conditions.

A unit in the Mission, comprising 22 national and international staff, deals solely with refugee issues. The team works at the central level in Zagreb, mostly with Government authorities, and undertakes extensive monitoring of returns-related issues from field offices in Gospic, Karlovac, Knin, Osijek, Pakrac, Vukovar, Sisak, Split and Zadar.

By August 2006, 121,391 ethnic Serb refugees had registered as having returned to Croatia, representing about 36 per cent of the total number who had left the country.

Recent statistics also reveal that the number of Croatian Serbs officially registered as refugees in Serbia, Montenegro, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, has dropped to an estimated 85,000 from some 270,000 in 2001 — indicating that they have either returned to Croatia or have chosen to settle in their countries of exile.

The latest census, in 2001, had revealed that ethnic Serbs made up just 4.5 per cent of Croatia's population of more than 4 million, compared with 12.2 per cent before the conflict.

Because the conflict had led to the complete or partial destruction of some 190,000 homes and properties belonging to both Croats and Serbs, access to housing has been a key precondition for a dignified and sustainable process of return.

Further complicating the matter is that about 19,500 predominantly Serb-owned properties in formerly occupied areas were made available by the State to Bosnian Croats — who had themselves fled the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina. In addition, some 30,000 former holders of occupancy/tenancy rights (OTR) lost their right to socially owned apartments in their absence.

Although the process of reconstruction and repossession of properties is now almost complete, there appears to have been little progress in the provision of alternative housing solutions to these former OTR holders. So far, out of 4,400 housing applications submitted to the Government, only a few dozen have resulted in an allocation of flats.

Antonella Cerasino, Spokesperson,
OSCE Mission to Croatia

SERBIA: STILL WAITING FOR DURABLE SOLUTIONS

Since the first influx of refugees into Serbia in 1991 until the peak of mass displacement from neighbouring countries in 1995, the

republic continues to host the highest number of refugees and internally displaced persons in the region.

This is despite the fact that official statistics show a significant decrease in the number of registered refugees, falling to 105,000 in 2006 from 538,000 in 1996, at the peak of the refugee crisis.

During the ten-year period from 1995, when the return process started, to the present, 89,428 persons are estimated to have returned to Croatia from Serbia and Montenegro. The returns to Bosnia and Herzegovina are believed to be about 70,000. How many of those who returned to their country of origin and actually remained there is not known.

The amendments to the Citizenship Law in Serbia in 2001, which enabled refugees to obtain Serbian citizenship under favourable conditions, served as the main stimulus for altering the status of “refugee” to the status of “citizen”, thus significantly transforming the statistics.

Nonetheless, it is estimated that more than 300,000 people residing in Serbia who had fled from one of the republics of the former Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia are still awaiting durable solutions.

Whether their preferred option is repatriation to their country of origin or integration within their host country, refugees still face daunting obstacles in claiming their rights in their countries of origin. Reportedly, this is especially true in the case of the returns to Croatia even concerning issues that are supposed to have been resolved, such as access to reconstruction, repossession of property and entitlement to acquired rights.

Some refugees in Serbia still live in collective centres and depend on the scarce resources of the State, which also needs to take care of more than 200,000 internally displaced persons from Kosovo. Others have simply dropped out of sight by taking Serbian citizenship; no one knows what their living conditions are, whether they want to return or stay, and what difficulties they face.

As the agreed deadline for the Sarajevo process approaches, one thing is clear: the vast majority of uprooted people living in Serbia are still waiting for a chance to take back control over their own lives after more than a decade of displacement.

Ruzica Banda, National Human Rights Officer,
OSCE Mission to Serbia

MONTENEGRO: LOWEST CASELOAD, BUT STILL SIGNIFICANT

There are no refugees and returnees from Montenegro in surrounding countries. Although it has the smallest caseload of refugees in the region, the number is significant relative to the country's size.

Of the 8,474 refugees, 6,105 are from Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2,343 are from Croatia and 26 are from Slovenia. A further 18,047 internally displaced persons from Kosovo are residing in Montenegro.

Besides being directly involved in the implementation of the Sarajevo ministerial declaration, the OSCE Mission to Montenegro provides the Montenegrin Commissariat for Displaced Persons with support towards implementing the country's strategy for resolving the refugee issue and the Sarajevo declaration.



OSCE MISSION TO CROATIA / IVOR PRICKETT

Near Benkovac, in Zadar, Croatia. Branko and Maria Banic take a break from clearing out their old house on the same day they returned from their 11 years as refugees in Serbia.

In its efforts to solve the displacement issue once and for all, Montenegro equally supports both options — for the refugees to return or to be locally integrated.

Between 2000 and 2005, a total of 1,826 refugees returned to their roots — 1,505 to Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) and 321 to Croatia. Since then, however, the number of returns has declined. In 2006, the UNHCR facilitated the voluntary repatriation of 13 refugees — 6 to BiH and 7 to Croatia. Three of these refugees returned to Montenegro, citing economic reasons.

Ivana Vujovic, National Education Officer,
OSCE Mission to Montenegro

Editor's note: The returns issue in Bosnia and Herzegovina was featured in the January 2006 issue of the OSCE Magazine.

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