



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

**Address of Mr. Paul Fritch
Director of the Office of the Secretary General,
at the Ministerial Review Conference on Solving the Refugee Situation
in the Western Balkans
Monday, 7 November 2011, Belgrade**

Ministers,
Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honour to address this conference on behalf of the OSCE today. At the outset, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to our Serbian hosts for their generous hospitality and for their initiative in organizing today's Ministerial Review Conference. This is a day of great significance for South Eastern Europe, and for the OSCE area as a whole.

I would also like to pay special tribute to the tireless engagement of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia in making today's Conference possible. These states and their societies have shown courage and vision in overcoming their differences, and agreeing to resolve issues that only a few years ago seemed intractable.

Overcoming the legacy of the recent past has been a daunting challenge for this region. Ultimately, it is the process of reconciliation, not only of states, but of societies, that provides the basis for political solidarity and co-operation, and

solidarity and co-operation that lay the foundation for regional economic development.

Of course, while the four states represented here today have been the engine driving this process forward, this effort has also benefited from strong, collective international support, which has included the OSCE, alongside UNHCR, the European Commission, the Council of Europe Development Bank and the United States. The OSCE is proud to have contributed to this effort.

Since the early 1990s, the OSCE has actively promoted peace, democracy and development throughout the Western Balkans. Our engagement began during years of tension and war, and we have worked to build genuine partnerships with the countries that host our field operations – with government officials, civil society representatives and local populations. We have not acted alone, but hand-in-hand with the governments and the citizens of the region, and with our international partners.

Today's *Joint Declaration on Ending Displacement and Ensuring Durable Solutions for Vulnerable Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons* is the culmination of an intense and collective engagement that began when the Sarajevo Declaration was adopted in January 2005, and was reinvigorated here in Belgrade in March of last year.

The impressive progress that has been achieved since that last Belgrade meeting clearly illustrates a renewed determination to address the needs of this region's most vulnerable citizens.

This process has not been easy, either for the countries of the region or for those who have remained displaced for so long. The fact we are here today testifies to

the fact that co-operation and agreement is possible even on the most difficult of issues.

Today, we are marking important progress in addressing the needs of some of the most vulnerable communities in this region. Though we are not quite crossing the finish line, it is clearly in sight.

We now look forward to the next step: a Donors' Conference in the first half of 2012, which will offer the international community a concrete opportunity to help the people of this region close a painful chapter in their history. In order to make the most of this opportunity, it is vital that the Regional Programme be well-prepared and sufficient funds committed at the Donors' Conference.

Ultimately, even in this time of financial austerity, the success of this common effort will not be judged by how much it cost, or by who did what and when. The only true measure will be the impact of our joint efforts on the affected communities and in towns and villages across the region. The OSCE stands ready to do all it can to help ensure that this process reaches a successful conclusion.

Finally, today's event is a significant moment in the recent history of this region, not only because of the progress we are marking on this issue, but also because it gives fresh hope that this same constructive spirit might be replicated in addressing other outstanding issues in this part of Europe. Here too, the OSCE remains firmly committed to helping the people of this region address the challenges that remain.

Thank you for attention.