



**STATEMENT BY AMBASSADOR MIROSLAVA BEHAM,
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF SERBIA TO THE OSCE,
ON THE OCCASION OF THE WORLD REFUGEE DAY,
AT THE 765th MEETING OF
THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

18 June 2009

Madame Chair,

Allow me this year again to draw the attention of the distinguished Permanent Council to the World Refugee Day on June 20, designated by the UNHCR to remind us all of the fates of 42 million uprooted people around the world. As the UNHCR points out, this year, with the world economic crisis threatening to slash aid budgets and amid enormous global uncertainty, there is even more need to ensure refugees are not forgotten. This is why the theme for this year's World Refugee Day was chosen to be "Real People, Real Needs." Every refugee is an individual – a woman, a man, a child – with a very specific, very personal and very dramatic story that deserves to be comprehended in its full scope.

Though the OSCE is not a humanitarian organization, its interest in refugee issues should be obvious: Settling refugee issues is part of post-conflict rehabilitation, it contributes to reconstructing and stabilizing war-torn societies and helps to restore the basic human rights of the displaced persons. Settling refugee issues is, in all its aspects, a considerable contribution to security.

This is, Madame Chair, why we believe that the World Refugee Day should be an occasion also for the OSCE to have, at least once a year, a close look at the organization's commitments and activities with regard to refugees. In this respect my delegation very much welcomes today's meeting of the Human Dimension Committee on displacement in the OSCE region with a special focus on the Western Balkans, and we would like to express our appreciation to the Greek Chairmanship, the Chairperson of the Human Dimension Committee, the Secretariat as well as the UNHCR for convening this meeting and participating in it.

Madame Chair,

During the tragic wars in the nineties the Western Balkans saw hundreds of thousands of refugees and displaced persons on all sides. We are talking about hundreds of thousands of individual fates – of women, men, children, of traumatized people who lost everything but their lives. Even many of those who could return to their former homes or tried to settle and integrate into a new environment still have to bear the

heavy burden of the past events and their personal experiences. Yet, the respective countries and governments undertook huge efforts to find lasting solutions for these people.

So did the Republic of Serbia. Of some 538.000 registered refugees in 1996, there are less than 97.000 left now, 75% of them come from Croatia. The majority of the former refugees – 200.000 of them – decided to integrate locally and become Serbian citizens. Still, Serbia houses the biggest refugee population in Europe and is declared by the UNHCR as the only protracted refugee situation on our continent, not taking into account more than 200.000 IDPs from Kosovo living in central Serbia.

It is obvious that for Serbia it is of essential significance to find lasting solutions for the return of the refugees, which requires the restitution of all rights of refugees in the countries of origin or compensation in cases where the restitution of rights is not possible any more. In this regard, Serbia advocates the strengthening of regional cooperation in order to reach just and sustainable solutions and believes that it is essential that all countries of the Western Balkans solve these issues on their way to full European Union membership. Serbia is fully dedicated to the cooperation in South-Eastern Europe and is convinced that finding solutions for the refugee problems is one of the most important preconditions for boosting good-neighbourly relations.

In concluding, Madame Chair, let me underline that Serbia very much appreciates the assistance of the OSCE Mission in Belgrade and of the OSCE in general with regard to tackling refugee and IDP issues in our country, as it highly values the support of the European Commission and the UNHCR in this regard. We believe that their continuing engagement is of essential importance for finding lasting and sustainable solutions to the refugee issue.

Thank you, Madame Chair.