

CROATIA

INITIAL OBJECTIVES

- Promote and facilitate the voluntary return to and within Croatia of all those who may require UNHCR's assistance, and support their long-term reintegration.
- Promote lasting solutions and safeguard the rights of refugees, returnees, and minorities.
- Maintain essential humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs).
- Rehabilitate national institutions, build up their skills and resources, and support community-reconciliation initiatives.

MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS, PROGRESS ACHIEVED AND CONSTRAINTS

Refugees

At mid-year, there were some 24,450 refugees in Croatia. Ethnic Croats from Bosnia and Herzegovina account for the vast majority, with smaller numbers of ethnic Muslims from Bosnia and Herzegovina (6,907) and refugees from Kosovo province (2,369). In addition, the country hosts some 50 other people from Kosovo, mostly Roma, who have not been granted refugee status by the Government, but enjoy protection from refoulement thanks to "protection letters" issued by UNHCR. UNHCR continued to encourage the authorities to recognise refugees who are without status. The Office also protected and assisted 22 asylum-seekers of other nationalities.

Most refugees live in private accommodation, often occupying the vacant houses of ethnic Serb Croatian refugees who are abroad. Some 3,455 refugees remain in government-run collective centres, the majority of whom are either unaccompanied elderly persons or extremely vulnerable refugees for whom there are limited prospects of finding durable solutions. Com-

munity services programmes implemented through NGOs at these centres target the most vulnerable refugees, and include kindergartens and occupational activities for adolescents, women and the elderly, as well as individual support and counselling. Extremely vulnerable refugees received social support through a network of volunteers.

UNHCR continued to monitor the situation of refugees, and to promote voluntary repatriation to Bosnia and Herzegovina through its field offices and network of legal aid NGOs. Information campaigns were organised to disseminate information relating to conditions of return, as well as changes in relevant laws and their implementation. Forty-four "go-and-see" visits allowed 1,960 refugees to see conditions first-hand inside Bosnia and Herzegovina (1,864 travelled to the Republika Srpska and 95 to the Federation). UNHCR directly supported other cross-border activities by providing assistance to individuals who have applied to return. Cross-border activities included the provision of legal and other assistance to facilitate the issuance of documents and the lodging of claims to rights and entitlements, housing assessments, and ascertaining the availability of host families and reconstruction assistance. UNHCR also continued to promote the repatriation of Kosovo Albanian refugees, in close co-ordination with its office in Kosovo.

The Office actively supported the governmental working group established to draft the national law on asylum. The majority of UNHCR's comments have been incorporated in the draft, which is still being reviewed.

Operational constraints included the lack of detailed information on refugees living in private accommodation, which made it difficult to monitor their situation and to ensure that they have adequate knowledge of their options. Lack of housing, economic opportunities and basic services in countries of origin, along with diminishing donor support and interest, are also factors limiting repatriation. The situation

of elderly refugees, who would continue to require specialised institutional care once back in Bosnia and Herzegovina, is particularly acute. Moreover, the local integration of refugees who do not wish to return is hampered by restrictions on economic rights and the lack of employment opportunities in Croatia. Funding constraints faced by the Government and by UNHCR, coupled with late signature of the requisite implementation agreement by the Office for Displaced Persons and Refugees (ODPR) this year, exacerbated the deterioration of living conditions in the 100 remaining collective centres that house refugees, displaced persons, as well as returnees.

IDPs

At the beginning of the year there were some 50,280 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Croatia. Some 8,565 returned during the first half of the year. By the end of June, just over 41,700 IDPs remained. This number includes some 31,000 ethnic Croats who originate from the Croatian Danube Region (CDR) but are displaced elsewhere in the country and 3,653 ethnic Serbs who originate from other parts of Croatia but who reside temporarily in the CDR. The remaining IDPs are categorised by the Government as those for whom "reconstruction is in progress". Most IDPs reside in private accommodation, but 10,100 still live in collective centres.

UNHCR's primary objective remains to promote and facilitate the return of IDPs to their homes. The Office, through staff in field locations and implementing partners, provides protection and humanitarian assistance, while monitoring the human rights situation in the CDR. It continued to urge the competent authorities to ensure the impartiality of Housing Commissions and increase their efficiency. Complementing UNHCR's extensive field activities, a network of specialised national and international NGOs provided legal counselling and information about return registration procedures. Vulnerable IDPs living in areas of return received assistance through a community-based network of volunteers, who provided social support, as well as through UNHCR's in-

kind income-generation programme, whose surplus products and services are provided to the displaced.

The most important impediments to the return of IDPs remain lack of sufficient and timely reconstruction assistance and limited economic opportunities in areas of return. Financial constraints have obliged UNHCR to focus its limited resources on providing assistance to returnees, while Government support is largely channelled to IDPs.

Returnees

Positive political developments, the improving legislative framework and the better security situation have contributed to increase minority returns to Croatia, both from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Within the framework of the national Return Programme, 6,393 refugees repatriated officially during the first six months of the year (some 1,100 from Bosnia and Herzegovina and the remainder from Yugoslavia). This constitutes a 35 per cent increase compared to the same period in 1999. Many more refugees are believed to have repatriated spontaneously. Over 50 per cent of the returnees in 2000 are aged 60 or older. The number of younger returnees increased only slightly during the first six months of the year.

Transport, a "welcome home" package and small cash grants were provided to refugees who repatriated under UNHCR auspices. UNHCR also provided non-food items, such as 301 rolls of plastic sheeting, 2,405 stoves, 3,848 blankets, 4,167 mattresses, 2,916 sets of agricultural tools and 12,000 packets of seeds. Other reintegration activities that benefited organised and spontaneous returnees alike included legal counselling and assistance to repossess property, to secure required documents, and to assert claims for pension rights or other entitlements. A total of 260 houses were repaired to provide returnees with one winter-proof room until homes can be fully repaired or rebuilt under the complementary government shelter programme. A total of 3,451 agriculture and small business packages

were provided to able-bodied vulnerable members of the community, with the aim of helping them attain self-sufficiency. Single women and women heads of family were specifically targeted. More than 5,000 families indirectly benefited from this scheme; the recipients must reimburse their loans in the form of products and services benefiting the most vulnerable members of the community, including IDPs. A UNHCR study revealed that the programme is having a positive impact, since the average monthly income of the direct beneficiaries has increased by 85 per cent, the repayment rate is close to 100 per cent, and most loans have been repaid ahead of schedule. A self-help or community-participation approach was used in implementing these activities whenever feasible.

Cross-border activities relating to voluntary repatriation included "go-and-see" visits by 1,019 refugees presently hosted in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Yugoslavia, and UNHCR Croatia's active participation in information campaigns in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Yugoslavia. The Office also followed up closely with the authorities on pending applications for return.

Legal and community services and, indirectly, income-generation activities benefited all vulnerable categories of the population and were not restricted to returnees. This approach helped foster inter-ethnic dialogue and reconciliation in communities of return.

UNHCR continued to participate in inter-agency mechanisms established to encourage the Government to amend discriminatory legislation. As a result, a Law on Amendments to the Law on Reconstruction was passed on 1 June. The new law reasserts the Government's commitment to assume responsibility for the repair or reconstruction of the war-damaged or destroyed property of its citizens. UNHCR also continued to advise and assist the Government and donor countries interested in financing return and reintegration projects submitted by Croatia in late 1999 in the framework of the Stability Pact for South Eastern Europe (Stability Pact). Several donor delegations vis-

ited the country to assess needs further. By the end of June, 18 shelter reconstruction and emergency repair projects were already being implemented or were in the advanced planning stage. Unfortunately, the vast majority are financed with funding redirected from other sources and not with fresh funds generated under the Stability Pact framework. Furthermore, these projects will cover only a fraction of the existing needs. Donors have increasingly recognised the importance of an integrated approach to sustainable return. Projects were therefore developed to provide returnees with a comprehensive package that includes shelter assistance, non-food domestic items and agriculture support or other income-generation inputs.

A number of constraints affected the programme for returnees. Despite some improvement, the competent authorities still take an average of three months to approve applications for return to Croatia. The lengthy approval process disheartens many applicants. The failure to enforce legislation regarding the repossession and reconstruction of property is another impediment to return. In addition, the poor state of the economy and high unemployment rates in areas of return, as well as poor social infrastructure, combine to discourage potential returnees, especially younger families. Financial constraints have also hampered efforts to increase the number of sustainable returns, since UNHCR has given priority to focusing on providing basic humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable, but not on meeting the full range of returnee needs.

REVISED OBJECTIVES AND PRIORITY ACTIVITIES FOR JULY - DECEMBER

UNHCR's overall objectives for the year remain unchanged. Priority activities for each group are set out below:

Refugees

- Obtain detailed information on the remaining refugees and ascertain their intentions, so as to develop a plan of action for the integration of those who do not wish to

return.

- Increase its support of minority returns to Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- Give priority to ensuring that the Government makes needed infrastructure repairs in collective centres and increases community services, especially for children.
- Assist the Government to establish the infrastructure needed for proper implementation of the law on asylum, once adopted, through training and other capacity-building activities.

IDPs

- Continue to urge donors to finance basic humanitarian assistance to all vulnerable groups in the community, without distinction between status and ethnicity, and fa-

ilitate sustainable return to areas of origin through the Stability Pact initiative.

Returnees

- Obtain more data on spontaneous returns and continue to follow-up on Stability Pact project proposals. UNHCR is convinced that more funding under the Stability Pact should go to filling existing gaps in national services.
- Make a special effort to secure more food and non-food items for distribution to returnees and other vulnerable persons in returnee communities.
- Monitor implementation of the provisions of recent legislation, particularly the recently amended law on reconstruction.

FINANCIAL DATA (USD)

	Initial Budget	Revised Budget	Total Funds Available*	Total Funds Obligated
AB and TF	16,880,347	14,159,878	6,788,714	6,695,300

*Includes income from unrestricted contributions, income from contributions restricted to the region/country, opening balance and adjustments.

