



## **Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe**

### **Mission to Croatia**

#### **Headquarters**

#### **News in Brief**

**29 September-12 October**

#### **Government takes steps aiming at kick-starting housing program for former occupancy/tenancy rights holders**

On 5 October, OSCE Head of Mission and the Heads of EC the Delegation, UNHCR and US Embassy met with the Minister for Maritime Affairs, Tourism, Transport and Development (MMATTD), Bozidar Kalmeta in order to discuss issues related to refugee return. The meeting focused on Government plans and international community suggestions aimed at speeding up implementation of housing programmes for refugees and displaced persons who used to live in socially owned flats with occupancy/tenancy rights (OTR) and who want to return. This is the last major category of refugees that have so far not had access to housing in Croatia if they wanted to return.

The Minister informed that as of the first half of October the consular and diplomatic representations of Croatia in the neighboring countries (Serbia and Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina) had been provided with the application forms for the two relevant housing programmes. In addition, forms had been delivered to the UNHCR for forwarding to its offices in those two countries. UNHCR announced that it would suggest to the Government what activities should be undertaken as part of a publicity campaign in Serbia-Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina to be conducted throughout the application period.

Given that the publicity campaign and the application procedure have been significantly delayed since the last programme was adopted in 2003, the international representatives suggested to the Government to extend the application deadline until the end of September 2005 for housing care in the areas outside the Areas of Special State Concern, i.e., for the areas that were always under the control of the Croatian Government, encompassing the large urban centers of the country. In the areas that remained under Government control, almost 24,000 households had their OTRs terminated in summary court proceedings. The Minister committed himself to recommending that the Government extend the deadline.

The international representatives and the Minister agreed to meet every month to review the implementation of these and related programmes, and that these meetings be prepared at working level meetings which would also involve other state bodies if needed.

#### **OSCE, UNHCR and European Commission suggest Trilateral Road Map on Refugee Return**

In a meeting with Minister of Maritime Affairs, Tourism, Transport and Development (MMATTD), Bozidar Kalmeta on 5 October, OSCE Head of Mission and the Heads of EC Delegation, UNHCR and US Embassy handed over a letter suggesting that the Government of Croatia take steps to agree with the governments of Serbia-Montenegro and Bosnia-Herzegovina on a Road Map for refugee return in order to close the refugee file by the end of 2006. The Road Map should include steps to remove remaining obstacles to return and to

provide adequate conditions for local integration of those refugees who want to stay in their place of refuge. The Road Map also proposes a staggered series of trilateral conferences facilitated by the international community. The letter was subsequently also delivered to Prime Minister Ivo Sanader. Similar letters were transmitted in Belgrade and Sarajevo.

### **Government schedules renewed talks with ethnic Serb ex-workers from the Borovo factory following demonstrations**

After more than one thousand laid-off workers, mainly of Serb ethnicity, from the former rubber and footwear factory in Borovo had announced their intention to stage protests in Vukovar, the Minister of Justice Vesna Skare-Ozbolt agreed to meet their representatives on 12 October for a second round of negotiations on the ex-workers' demands.

As a result of the war, the Borovo plant, which had 20,000 workers, ceased to operate. Most Croat workers took refuge in other parts of Croatia while the management settled in Zagreb. On 7 February 1992 the Administrative Board of Borovo in Zagreb passed a decision that all workers who failed to contact the main office in Zagreb within a designated time period would lose their jobs and their labour rights, a decision *de facto* depriving most Serb workers, who stayed in the occupied territory, from their rights.

Upon return of the Borovo company management to Vukovar in the course of 1997-98, the former employees initiated a number of lawsuits in the municipal courts, but received systematically negative decisions after long proceedings. Consequently, a group of employees created the "Association of Borovo plant employees 91" and filed group lawsuits in the course of 2003. The association includes almost 4000 former employees. Meanwhile, another group of 1700 former Borovo employees, mainly ethnic Croats, who were also out of a work, filed lawsuits claiming their labour rights. The lawsuits by former Croat employees resulted in an out-of-court settlement with the Government of Croatia in April 2003. Noting the fact that the Government had made a settlement with one group of employees, the Association addressed an official letter to the Government of Croatia, asking for a solution for all former Borovo employees. The Government met with the Association on 8 June 2004 and agreed that a joint working-group should be formed.

Considering that no major developments had occurred after 3 months, the Association organised a peaceful protest in front of the factory on 21 September 2004. According to Mr Mirko Grahovac, the Head of Association, about 1200-1300 workers participated in the protest. During that protest, Mr Grahovac declared that the Borovo workers in question were subject to discrimination on the basis of their ethnicity.

The Association subsequently announced another round of protests in Vukovar on 11 October 2004, including road blockades. On 6 October, the Association received a letter from Vukovar Sirmium County Association of Croatian Homeland War Invalids (HVIDRA) saying that the announced blockades evoked dark memories of the 1990/91 war and sufferings of the non-Serb population. Therefore, HVIDRA would not exclude the use of force to prevent the announced blockades.

### **EU enlargement process: focus on general issues within Mission's mandate**

As a result of the decision by the European Council on 18 June to grant Croatia the formal status of an EU candidate country, the Council of the European Union adopted on 13 September the *European Partnership with Croatia* which identifies short and medium term priorities for Croatia to move closer to the EU.

The EU political priorities identified in the European Partnership largely coincide with the Mission's mandate-related issues which include, *inter alia*, refugee return, minority rights, judicial reform, war crimes issues and media legislation.

On 6 October the European Commission issued the *Strategy Paper on the enlargement process*, which sets out a pre-accession strategy and a negotiating framework which includes a suspension clause in case of a "serious and persistent breach" of the democratic principles on which the Union is founded.

In an address to the Croatian Parliament on 13 October, European Union Enlargement Commissioner Gunter Verheugen emphasized that close cooperation with the European Commission, the UNHCR, the OSCE and the governments of Bosnia-Herzegovina and Serbia and Montenegro will help the Croatian government complete the refugee return file.

### **Media report about the fall of popular support to EU and NATO membership**

Local media have reported widely on the results of an opinion poll delivered on 5 October by the *Puls* agency, in which the support for the Croatian membership in the EU and the NATO has reached an all-time low. Only 49 percent of citizens support the membership in the EU, which is 15 percentage points lower than in the beginning of the year. The number of opponents has almost doubled and currently stands at 41 percent.

The Government announced that it is starting a media campaign to explain the benefits of membership. The Minister for European Integration Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic stated: "*This is a confirmation (...) that our approach to the citizens must be more direct. We must inform the citizens (...) so they can adapt to the challenge in the best way*".

The media noted that, in the same opinion poll, public support for the membership in the NATO has fallen even lower than that for the EU. According to this poll, for the first time, there are more opponents to the entry into the NATO (45 percent) than supporters (39 percent).

In a related effort, the Mission is planning, together with the Government, the UNHCR, the European Commission and USAID, a Public Awareness Campaign to inform the public about the importance of reconciliation, refugee return, and multi-ethnicity, and to promote a vision that can be shared by all Croatian citizens.

### **Governing party HDZ experiences setbacks in two local by-elections**

In two recent local by-elections, held in the cities of Pozeza on 5 September and Metkovic on 3 October, the media reported on setbacks for the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). In Pozeza, a city of 28,000 inhabitants in western Slavonia, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) obtained 44 percent of the votes. In Metkovic, a city of 15,000 inhabitants in southern Dalmatia, the independent list of local political leader, Stipe Gabric Jambo, received an overwhelming 60 percent of the vote for the City Council. HDZ received around 25 percent, while other parties, including SDP, were marginalized. Stipe Gabric Jambo, a former HDZ local leader who recently had to leave the party and decided to set up his own list, is a well known local businessman, who has recently been the subject of recurrent questioning by judicial authorities. Although he was known to be a HDZ hard-liner, he is maintaining good relations with Serb communities in his town.

The elections in Pozega and Metkovic will play an important role in setting the stage for the next round of local elections throughout the country, which are due by the spring of 2005. The by-elections demonstrate that the voting patterns at the local level may be very different from the national elections. Although Pozega and Metkovic are not communities with major issues related to refugee return, it is likely that the upcoming local elections will have an important impact on the conditions for refugee return in many communities.

For the first time in country-wide local elections, the voters will elect national minority representatives in accordance with the Constitutional Law on National Minorities. This is likely to enhance the role of minority issues in the local election campaigns.