

Novosti sedam dana (publication of the Serb national minority), 15 July 2005, p. 3

The OSCE Mission's bi-annual report on Croatia's progress in meeting its international obligations:

Provide Serb returnees with dignified living conditions

By Nenad JOVANOVIĆ

The situation faced by refugees-returnees is very poor, according to the Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, Ambassador Jorge Fuentes. The Government only recently adopted the 'Road Map' – a plan to resolve the issue of refugee return - in compliance with the Sarajevo Conference. The OSCE Mission will initiate an information campaign in September aimed at familiarizing refugees with the possibilities available to them. The Mission will also strive for an extension of the 30 September deadline for housing care applications from former occupancy/tenancy rights holders who previously resided outside areas of special state concern.

The presentation of a report on Croatia's progress in meeting its international obligations, which covers a six month period dating from November 2004, was an opportunity for journalists to meet the new Head of the OSCE Mission to Croatia, Ambassador Jorge Fuentes, who succeeded Peter Semneby at the end of April. Of the six areas covered by the Mission's mandate, the report highlights that progress was made in three – the development of democratic institutions and civil society, the strengthening of media freedoms and the democratization of the police – while further efforts were needed in the remaining three areas – refugee return, rule of law and minority rights. On the whole, it is the assessment of the OSCE that, in spite of the necessity to work more on the aforementioned areas, the situation in Croatia is much better than it was six months ago and the country is on the right track.

Poor refugee and returnee situation

“During the beginning of the period covered by the report, the Government's fulfillment of its commitments pertaining to the Mission's mandate was slow. It was, however, facing presidential and local elections which affected progress in the fulfillment of this goal,” said Ambassador Fuentes, emphasising that in the last two to three months a rapid improvement was noted, primarily due to the Government's agreement to present a plan to resolve refugee problems and the announcement by Prime Minister Ivo Sanader on changes to the Electoral Law. As far as refugee/returnee issues are concerned, which are the most difficult issues within the Mission's mandate, Ambassador Fuentes said that he had already visited field and familiarized himself with the real situation, which he considered to be very serious and poor. He emphasized that Croatia has to provide Serb returnees with dignified living conditions. The Ambassador stated that during talks with the Government he had received assurances that everything necessary would be done as soon as possible. He expressed his satisfaction with the fact that the Government, after

almost two years since the Sarajevo Conference, had accepted the “Road Map” – a plan to resolve the issue of refugee return by 2006.

The second critical issue is the state of affairs in the judiciary, where many improvements need to be made. Ambassador Fuentes said that he had read that Croatian judges top the list when it comes to corruption, ahead of doctors and police officers. In other countries, he said, the order is different.

Changes necessary to the Electoral Law

Regarding the judiciary, Fuentes also mentioned the co-operation between the OSCE and Hague Tribunal. The OSCE will monitor war crime trials which will be transferred from the Hague to Croatia, in order to ensure just and fair trials.

“This will be a good opportunity for the Croatian judiciary to show that it is capable,” said Fuentes.

The OSCE also requested certain political reforms, primarily changes to the Electoral Law. These changes should encompass the voters’ registry, which according to the Mission is inaccurate and outdated; campaign financing; media coverage; domestic election monitors; the establishment of a permanent election body; as well as out-of-country voting. “This issue is important since voters outside Croatia considerably influenced the recent presidential as well as previous elections,” said Ambassador Fuentes, adding that the equal status of voters from the Croatian Diaspora and those of Serb ethnicity living outside Croatia should be ensured.

Speaking of the request of the Croatian public to close down the OSCE Mission, Fuentes said that Croatia itself would close the Mission by meeting all its international commitments contained within the Mission’s mandate, which the Croatian authorities are aware of. Ambassador Fuentes warned that the departure of the OSCE without completing its work would be catastrophic, not only for the OSCE but also for Croatia on its way towards its goal – accession to the EU.

With regard to refugees, their number is still huge: 350 thousand refugees fled the country, approximately 117 thousand of them have returned but almost half of them went back to Serbia and Montenegro or Bosnia and Herzegovina due to their inability to live in Croatia and exercise their rights.

Upcoming information campaign for refugees

“There are still approximately 200 thousand Serb refugees from Croatia who are uncertain of what to do,” said Ambassador Fuentes, announcing that in September the OSCE Mission would initiate an information campaign aimed at providing information to these people on the possibilities for return and explain to them that there is a place for everybody in Croatia.

“We are not forcing anyone to return nor do we want to talk them out of it. It is our intention to help those unable to make a decision and show them what is available to them,” said Ambassador Fuentes.

On the problem of former occupancy/tenancy rights holders, Ambassador Fuentes said that the deadline for applications for the provision of housing care outside areas of special state concern is 30 September. He did, however, mention the possibility that this may be extended.

“We will try to postpone the deadline as much as possible but this cannot continue indefinitely,” said Ambassador Fuentes. He added that the Croatian Government warned the OSCE that without a fixed deadline their hands were tied, i.e. without an accurate number of people involved, the Government was not able to begin working.