

**Written Contribution by Senior Representative of the Head of Mission,
Mr Alexander Chuplygin at 22nd Economic and Environmental Forum**

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**Session I – Flooding disaster in South-Eastern Europe.
Lessons learned and the role of the OSCE**

The devastating floods in mid-May which affected Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), hit 46 municipalities in BiH and left more than 20 dead and an estimated 40,000 people temporarily displaced across the country.¹ In the immediate aftermath, the Mission witnessed a considerable amount of spontaneous relief and cleaning efforts by citizens, often blurring ethnic and entity lines. Unfortunately, the spirit of solidarity and co-operation at the grass-roots level was not well replicated at the political level.

The floods directly and dramatically changed the socio-economic landscape in affected areas – and indirectly had an impact on the entire country. They include massive physical destruction, loss of livelihoods (loss of income or income generating assets), disrupted and collapsed public services, anticipated additional pressure on the already weak social welfare system, movement of people within and between municipalities, stalled return process with decreased sustainability, potential prolonged economic crises in affected areas, a likely deepening of the overall economic crisis throughout BiH, and increased potential for civic unrest.

The Mission's response was immediate. We offered assistance to the BiH Ministry of Security's 112 Operational Communication Centre, the Armed Forces as well as the Red Cross. Internally, the Staff Executive Council immediately started collecting aid for distribution to affected staff members and communities. Equally, the Mission provided staff who volunteered daily in clean-up efforts across the country. Dedicated field visits were organized to identify specific needs on the ground, in particular those of socially vulnerable groups such as returnee or Roma communities.

The Secretary General offered 30,000 EUR to the Mission from the OSCE's Charity Ball fund to assist with flood relief. Additionally, the Missions to Skopje and Kosovo and ODIHR staff also contributed more than 5,000 EUR. This funding served to procure the necessary emergency equipment, which was distributed to the most affected communities through the local Red Cross offices. Internally, the Mission staff collected around 6,000 EUR in cash, other than supplies, food and necessities, that were directly distributed as emergency aid to affected staff members and communities overall. Throughout the entire post-disaster period, the Mission remained engaged with national and international agencies including frequent interaction with the situation centre of the Ministry of Security and attendance at coordination and briefing meetings hosted by the UN.

¹ In August, the Mission released a documentary filmed entitled "Once the Water Recedes" which includes first-hand accounts of the devastating floods as well as shortcomings and struggles in the wake of the natural disaster. The film is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xAh8jL3FCIY>

Recognizing that stronger field presence was needed, the Mission opened five temporary premises in heavily affected areas, including Bijeljina, Maglaj, Orašje, Šamac and Prijedor. The increased presence on the ground strengthened the Mission's monitoring capacities in the flood-affected areas, enabled the development of appropriate early warning indicators and allowed the early engagement in the implementation of tailored programmes to prevent, counter or mitigate the negative impact of floods.

The Head of Mission instructed the formation of an internal working group which proposed specific adjustments to programmatic work:

1st Dimension: strengthen co-operation among BiH disaster response actors and advocate for identification of lessons learned from the disaster for improvement of future response.

2nd Dimension: in-country and regional co-operation through Aarhus Centers; activities related to co-ordination of recovery activities and mitigation effects of future natural disasters.

Gender: adjust work with gender institutional mechanisms to incorporate gender issues into disaster management, including a regional conference on UNSCR 1325 analysing flood-related events and discussing human security.

Governance: increase the number of target municipalities to include those impacted by floods, focusing on public trust in governments, functional public institutions in the recovery process, and community cohesion.

Human Rights: adjust engagement with Associations of social workers on social protection after the natural disaster; monitor access to reconstruction assistance; and support information campaigns on the RHP.

Education: focus on support to education institutions in affected areas, especially access to services by returnees. Adjust 'Index for Inclusion' activities to reflect issues arising from the flooding.

In the future, the Mission will continue to reassess its activities against the realities of the affected communities. As the election campaign intensifies in September, the Mission will monitor political dynamics in these vulnerable communities.

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