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Refugees from Former Yugoslavia - "Send the right message for Kosovo: Learn from and remedy the policy failures over Bosnia and Croatia"

The armed confrontation in Kosovo province has provoked a worldwide outcry to not permit "another Bosnia". Yet some of the same governments denouncing alleged 'ethnic cleansing' in Kosovo are pursuing policies towards repatriation of refugees from other parts of former Yugoslavia which fall far short of a just remedy for the violations the world witnessed in the earlier conflicts in Bosnia and Croatia, Amnesty International said on the eve of the Humanitarian Issues Working Group (HIWG) meeting.

"From governments around the world, strong words on Kosovo sound hollow when we look at the current approach by the international community to 'resolving' the problem of mass expulsion in Bosnia-Herzegovina," the organization said. "Some governments seem more interested in ridding themselves of their perceived refugee 'burden' than in ending the agony that refugees face."

Current repatriation policies by certain governments threaten to make concrete the results of the mass expulsion in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Moreover, reported plans to send large numbers of Bosnian Croats to Croatia would quite certainly make permanent the forcible exile of Croatian Serbs who fled but want to return to their homes.

"What this says to the authorities behind the human rights violations is that if they are patient enough to sit out the international community's criticism, they will eventually realize their goals when the international community loses interest in promoting fair solutions," Amnesty International said.

This week the international community is poised to consider issues relating to refugees from former Yugoslavia at a meeting on Friday of the Humanitarian Issues Working Group (HIWG), chaired by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Although the regularly scheduled meeting will be discussing progress towards the return of refugees and displaced people to their pre-war homes in Bosnia-Herzegovina, on the minds of delegates is sure to be the deteriorating situation in Kosovo province.

"In the context of looking for protection for those fleeing human rights violations in the Kosovo crisis, the message to the authorities in the region must be unambiguous: in defining a response to Kosovo the international community should also remedy the policy failures over Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia," Amnesty International stated.

"As governments begin to think about their response to Kosovo province, they should have in the forefront of their minds the human rights of those fleeing, not their own narrow national interests," the organization urged.

The lesson from Croatia

Croatian politicians reported in May that a joint German-Croatian parliamentarians' working group had discussed a Croatian government invitation to resettle 80,000 Bosnian Croat refugees currently in Germany to Croatia this year. Amnesty International fears that Bosnian Croats sent to Croatia would be accommodated in housing owned by Croatian Serbs. The organization shares the concerns of a national human rights organization, the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights in Croatia, that such a plan is intended by the Croatian authorities as a means to prevent the return of Croatian Serbs, by making sure that they have nowhere to go.

"An agreement by the Croatian authorities to accept such a large number of refugees is wholly inconsistent with the authorities' complaints that they cannot manage the return of large numbers of their own citizens -- Croatian Serbs," Amnesty International said.

Human rights violations have prevented the return of Croatian Serb refugees and displaced people to their pre-war homes. In fact, from within the tiny remaining community of Croatian Serbs, people continue to flee.

The authorities in Croatia frequently respond to calls that they should facilitate the return of Croatian Serbs by pointing to the plight of Bosnian Croat refugees in Croatia. Many come from areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina where, if they were to return, they would now be in a minority, and for them too it is not safe to return.

The lesson from Bosnia-Herzegovina

At the last meeting of the HIWG in December 1997 it was declared that 1998 would be the year of "minority return" -- allowing the return of refugees and displaced people to pre-war communities where their nationality is now in the minority. Amnesty International supports this effort made by the international community to remedy the violation of mass expulsion.

"Authorities should improve the human rights situation so that people, regardless of their nationality, can return to their own homes in safety if they so choose," Amnesty International said. "Nevertheless, given the risks that face those who do choose to return, the increased efforts this year should not be interpreted by host countries of asylum as a green light to send back minorities."

Earlier this year, Amnesty International criticized the policies of German *lander* which, contrary to the advice of the UNHCR, forcibly repatriated refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina who would now be minorities if they returned to their pre-war homes. The consequence for most such people is that they are forced to relocate to areas where their national group is a majority, which in turn creates an obstacle for the minorities who wish to return there. The pace of forcible repatriations has doubled: so far in 1998, and Bavaria, Berlin, Brandenburg, Hesse, North Rhine-Westphalia, Saarland, Saxony, Thuringia *länder* all have policies which allow for the forcible repatriation of Bosnian refugees who would now be in a minority if they returned to their pre-war homes.
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