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Report on 1998 field trip to the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia

I would like to express my heartfelt appreciation to the many people who assisted me during my visit, in particular Petar Bogdanovic, Ambassador Christopher Lamb and the staff of the Australian Embassy and the staff of UNHCR, IOM and Care Australia; and those who helped in the planning phase, in particular Slavia Ilic, Svetlana Dzelebdzic and Nikola Gotovac.

(1) EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 1998 the Refugee Council of Australia's Executive Director visited the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) to assess the situation with respect to refugees in FRY and the emerging crisis in the southern province of Kosovo. During her visit she met with UNHCR, IOM, the Australian Post and operational NGOs, visited Collective Centres in which refugees are housed and met with local people.

The following report presents information gathered during the visit, containing, inter alia:

- a description of the current situation of the refugees from Former Yugoslavia in Serbia, including reports on field visits;
- an analysis of the durable solutions for these refugees – repatriation, local integration and resettlement; and
- information on the Kosovo crisis and its impact on Europe.

In summary the report:

- expresses deep concern about the situation of the refugees in Serbia, noting their great vulnerability and the failure of support programs to cover basic needs;
- notes the difficulties associated with repatriation to most areas of Croatia and Bosnia;
- stresses the ongoing importance of resettlement as a durable solution for certain individuals;
- notes the potential for regional destabilisation as a result of the Kosovo crisis, stressing that this has not ended with the ceasefire;
- recognises the burden on European States hosting those who have fled the fighting in Kosovo;

- notes with concern the existence of barriers that prevent those fleeing the conflict from finding protection; and
- recognises the importance of admission agreements related to providing temporary protection in the case of mass outflow.

Further, it calls on the Australian Government to maintain its resettlement program in the region, to play a role in ensuring protection and support both for the refugees in Serbia and Kosovars and to refrain from returning asylum seekers to Kosovo until there is a marked improvement in conditions in the province.

(2) BACKGROUND TO THE VISIT

The last Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA) field visit to Former Yugoslavia was in August 1995. The purpose of that visit was to meet with the people who had been expelled from Srebrenica in possibly the most publicised act of ethnic cleansing that occurred during the Balkan War. Fortuitously, the visit coincided with the Croatian army's offensive to reclaim the Serb-held areas of southern Croatia known as the Krajina. This offensive resulted in the largest single exodus of the war and created one of its greatest challenges: assisting over 170,000 people to move across Bosnia and providing emergency assistance for them once they reached the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The resultant field report was thus able to focus on both these events.

Three years have since passed. The women and children of Srebrenica have been unable to return to their homes. The grisly fate of their husbands, sons and fathers is now known. And those expelled from the Krajina are still in exile.

The Refugee Council has continued to monitor events as they have unfolded in the region. Understandably, as 1998 progressed, the level of concern about developments in Kosovo increased, both in relation to the considerable suffering of the people and also the potential for regional destabilisation. In addition, RCOA continued to receive alarming reports from community groups about the conditions in which the >500,000 refugees in Serbia were living. Further, the Refugee Council is conscious that for some time, a significant proportion of Australia's humanitarian program has come from this region and the number has not lessened following the Dayton Peace Accords and the resultant repatriation programs.

In the light of all of the above, it was resolved that it was timely to pay a return visit to the region, with the focus this time to be on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY).

In preparation for the visit, meetings were conducted with workers and leaders from various Former Yugoslav communities to canvas their views and gain an understanding of the issues of greatest importance to them, so that appropriate questions could be asked and information gathered.

The visit was undertaken from 23rd–29th September 1998. During this time meetings were held with:

- various staff in the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR);
- those involved in the pilot orientation program being run by the International Organisation of Migration (IOM) for refugees resettling in Australia;
- one local (Yugoslav Red Cross) and one international (CARE) non-government organisation;
- staff of the Australian Embassy; and
- the Belgrade Centre for Human Rights.

In addition, I was able to meet socially with many Serbian people and field visits were conducted to five Collective Centres in the Belgrade and Vojvodina regions. It was not possible to visit Kosovo.

As with the previous visit, this visit took place at an "interesting time". The situation in Kosovo was rapidly deteriorating and NATO forces were on the verge of airstrikes against the Serbian Government. Foreign embassy staff were on alert to evacuate at short notice and in fact did so not long after I left Belgrade.

The following report documents the information gathered from these meetings and visits, with a focus on those issues raised with me by the community prior to the visit. It also attempts to draw conclusions from the information gathered and presents a series of recommendations to the Australian Government.

Full report available (in hard copy) from the Council for \$27.50 (inc GST)