

Croatia: Serb Property Restitution Held Up

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Government efforts to return property to Serbs who fled the Krajina region are dogged with problems.

Croatia is finding it harder than expected to make good its offer to give Serbs back the homes they lost when they were chased out of the country seven years ago.

Economic hardship, corruption and a continuing refugee movements have frustrated Prime Minister Ivica Racan's invitation for Serbs to return to the Krajina region, where they once formed a majority.

A military operation by late president Franjo Tudjman prompted some 200,000 Croatian Serbs - almost the entire population of the Krajina - to flee to both Yugoslavia and Republika Srpska.

The motive for the premier's offer is believed to be a desire to gain respectability in the eyes of the European Union. Croatia hopes to join the EU and Racan feels he must demonstrate respect for the principle of private property.

Racan called on Croats living in homes once owned by Serbs to move out by the end of the year.

About 10,000 displaced Bosnian Croats went to Krajina at the invitation of Tudjman to take over dwellings vacated by the Serbs. And recently, several hundred Croat families came to Krajina from western Bosnia.

Most originally lived in other parts of Bosnia before the 1992-1995 war. They moved to the western areas of the republic after the Serbs lost control of the region. Now they have been forced out again, as Serbs return to towns such as Drvar and Bosansko Grahovo and reclaim their property.

If the Croats move out of Krajina, Racan must find them somewhere else to live. This could mean resettling some 9,000 people at a cost of about 600 million kuna (100 million euros), a sum Croatia can ill afford.

Most Croatian refugees from Bosnia do not intend to go back there, according to Tomo Aracic, president of the Association of Croatian Refugees, ZUNH. He said this was confirmed in a recent poll by the organisation.

Josip Stanic a Bosnian Croat from Knin in central Krajina, told IWPR he did not want to leave. He said he had bought land and asked for government help to build a house on it. "If they help me, I will leave the house where I live at the moment," Stanic said. But he would not move if it meant a prolonged stay in a refugee detention centre.

Another problem is widespread corruption, aggravated by poor economic

prospects and high unemployment. Bosko Kablar, a deputy of the Serbian Peoples Party in Knin's municipal assembly, is still unable to reclaim his property even though he returned in 1996. He said passing a restitution law was one thing, implementing it quite another.

Kablar said some houses were returned to their owners only after they had paid bribes of between 250 and 500 euros to the Bosnian Croats living there.

Bosnian Croats claim that when they first arrived in Krajina they had to bribe housing officials to move into vacated Serb homes. Now, they said, they are simply trying to get their money back. On top of that they would have to pay bribes of 500 or 1500 euros to regain the houses they left in the Bosnian Federation or Republika Srpska, RS.

Asked about this the RS deputy minister for refugees and displaced persons, Drago Vuleta, shrugged and said, "We cannot beat corruption".

So far only a few Krajina Serbs have reclaimed their property. Dragan Bukorovic, 30, from the village of Biskupije, near Knin, has been waiting since January 1999 to reclaim his family home from Croatian refugees. He handed the Croats a government expulsion order but they ignored it.

Despite all the problems Bukorovic is optimistic. He told IWPR, "I don't expect anything from the government, but I expect it to return what belongs to me". He is prepared to wait until the end of the year after which he will take the government to the European Court in Strasbourg.

The director of the local OSCE office, Jeremy Ainslie, blamed Croatia's financial problems for the failure of Serbs to return home. "Once the good will and actions of the government are recognised," he said, "the international community will offer assistance."

The overall security situation in Knin and Krajina is stable. The two communities avoid conflict, realising that their problems can be resolved only through cooperation.

Zeljko Komic, ZUNH deputy president, said his association had signed a document on mutual cooperation with the Serbian National Council - a new political alliance set up local Serbs. It stressed that the restoration of property to its original owners and the provision of shelter for evicted families must go hand in hand.

It is not clear if the security situation will deteriorate once expulsions get underway. For now Knin is empty during weekends. The Bosnian Croats say the Serbs leave for Serbia to spend their pensions on cheaper goods. The Serbs say the Bosnian Croats work on their lands in neighbouring Bosnia.

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