

## **Disabled Veterans Feel Forgotten in Bosnia**

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New law on war invalids promises little change for thousands of ex-fighters who eke out a pitiful existence on minute pensions.

Halil Buric proudly shows off black-and-white photographs of himself waving excitedly from the top of Mont Blanc, which he says he climbed six times.

One reason why he is so proud of these shots is because he knows he will never relive the experience, after a wound received in the 1992-5 Bosnian war left him almost 100 per cent disabled.

Today, he feels bitter about the financial compensation he gets from the Bosnian state and as a result he recently tore up all the awards he received for heroism in war. "I can barely survive from the aid we get," he told IWPR, tears filling his eyes.

Buric is not the only war invalid who feels desperate and, in the last analysis, betrayed by the state they helped to save.

"We are all in a grave financial situation because the state is not able to create a quality welfare programme," said Safet Redzic, president of the Alliance of War Veteran Invalids, RVI, of Bosnia and Hercegovina. "We got our wounds fighting for Bosnia."

There are no precise figures for the number of war invalids in Bosnia but the local Helsinki Human Rights Committee says about one adult citizen in ten has disabilities of one sort or another.

One is Dzevad Abrasi, 40, from Tuzla whose disability is categorised at 30 per cent. On a pension of 50 convertible marks a month (around 25 euro), Abrasi has to feed a wife and five children.

The Abrasi family has got by partly through selling what is left of their possessions. "I have already sold almost everything," he told IWPR.

"Today I've come to sell these boots, so I can buy some flour," he added, waiting for buyers in the dilapidated RVI offices in Tuzla. "No one helps us veteran invalids, even though we're the ones who fought in the war."

Ibrahim Nadarevic, the Federation Minister for Veteran and War Invalid Affairs, says his ministry tries to provide high-quality aid for disabled veterans, including free medical care.

But the invalids say this claim is inaccurate, as the free medical aid does not include some of the most needed drugs, which are also the most expensive.

"If you can't buy the medicine you need, you're forced to get some replacement medication, which doesn't help as much," said Safet Redzic.

As of January 2005, the Federation passed a new law on the rights of veterans and war invalids, raising payments to those classed as 70 per cent invalids but cutting them to people with lesser disabilities.

Although some members of the RVI in Sarajevo complain bitterly over the new law, even warning of protests, Redzic says it will be more just.

He is prepared to face down criticism over the decision to cut funds for those on lower disability. "Now there are cases of people with 20 per cent disability getting twice the amount of money some 100 per cent invalids get," he said in December, supporting the proposed change.

Ibrahim Nadarevic also says the benefits of the new law will outweigh any problems, and that it will clear up the confusion created by two different systems previously in operation, one applying to Bosniak veterans and the other to Bosnian Croats.

Halil Buric is also content with the change, as he stands to see his income increased. But Dzevad Abrasi, whose invalidity is less serious, is gloomy about what it means for his family. His tiny pension will now be even smaller. "Now instead of 50 marks I will receive about 30 a month," he said.

The high unemployment rate in Bosnia means few invalids can supplement these pitiful sums with even a part-time job.

The RVI says the jobless rate among its members is about 70 per cent. Another group, the Association of Labour Invalids of the Bosnia and Hercegovina Federation, says it believes up to 90 per cent of even work-capable invalids are unemployed.

The situation is no better on the other side of Bosnia, in Republika Srpska, RS. Djordje Rogic, president of the RVI in RS, says veterans' unemployment rate in the Serb entity is also around 70 per cent. "The RVI unemployment is a major problem in the Republika Srpska," he said.

Edhem Trnka, president of the Association of Labour Invalids, says there is not much sign of matters improving, "When companies are restructured, invalids are the first to lose their jobs. Getting a new job is almost impossible for invalids."

Redzic agrees, "Employers want to get rid of people with disabilities, as they do not bring in the profits that healthy people might."

As an example of society's negative attitude to invalids, Trnka cited the example of Mirhad Vejzovic of Mostar who was left with 50 per cent disability after an accident at work in a transport company. The court ruled that the company was to blame but awarded Vejzovic only nominal financial compensation, less than one euro.

"That is offensive! But that is the attitude of the court towards people with disabilities," Trnka said. "That is proof of who is being protected - the employers, rather than victims."

Aida Sunje is a Sarajevo-based journalist.

**Location:** Bosnia and

**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/disabled-veterans-feel-forgotten-bosnia>