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Croatia: Too soon to hail success in Eastern Slavonia

"It is too early to hail Eastern Slavonia a success story," Amnesty International said today as the United Nations Transitional Authority in Eastern Slavonia (UNTAES) ended its mandate in the last rebel Serb area in Croatia.

Eastern Slavonia returned today to full control of the Croatian authorities, but according to Amnesty International, Croatian promises that Croatian Serbs will be protected must be matched by an improved security environment and an end to impunity.

International and domestic commentators have expressed congratulations that the transition of the region to Croatian control has not been marked by a mass exodus of Croatian Serbs. According to UNTAES, approximately 15,000 to 20,000 Croatian Serbs have left the region during the two years it has been under the administration of the United Nations. Approximately 125,000 to 130,000 people were believed to live in the region when the UNTAES mandate began.

However, the possibility still remains that unless the human rights of Croatian Serbs are fully protected, they still may choose to leave Croatia for the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina, or other countries.

According to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), approximately 30,000 people have relocated property to Serbia from Eastern Slavonia -- without actually having moved from the region yet. Although such departures might not be an exodus, unchecked violence and intimidation could lead to a steady trickle of Croatian Serbs out of the country over the coming year.

Leaflets calling for Croatian Serbs to leave before January 15 were distributed in Vukovar in November 1997, urging Croatian Serbs to leave. "We will kill in silence, slowly but not gently," they stated.

While Croatian Government officials have repeatedly stated in public that those Croatian Serbs who wish to stay in Croatia are welcome to do so, and will be entitled to the same rights as other Croatian citizens, Amnesty International remains unconvinced of the Croatian authorities real commitment to protecting all its citizens regardless of their nationality.

Amnesty International will not be convinced of that commitment until, for example, investigations into violent attacks result in fair and adequate prosecutions. Under the watchful eye of the international community, investigations have begun into increasing violent incidents in the past couple of months in the region -- including the December 1997 grenade attacks on the house

of a Serbian Orthodox priest, and grenade attacks in November 1997 on houses owned by Croatian Serbs.

But Amnesty International is all too well aware that, in the past, although the authorities have claimed to investigate and prosecute those responsible for attacks on Croatian Serbs, proceedings have not been adequate. Following attacks in villages near Hrvatska Kostajnica (in another part of Croatia) in May 1997, for instance, the Croatian authorities only charged 10 people for the relatively minor offence of "participating in a gathering which committed a criminal act".

In that particular case, a crowd of about 150 Bosnian Croat refugees armed with sticks and poles systematically identified, ransacked and assaulted the occupants of primarily Croatian Serb houses in the area. Dozens of Croatian Serbs were beaten not only during the initial mob attacks in the villages, but also in isolated assaults over following days -- including one 65-year-old Croatian Serb man, Mirko Kne_evi_, who died in hospital apparently as a result of such beatings.

Even though reports of the incidents at Hrvatska Kostajnica indicate that witnesses would be able to identify those responsible for specific assaults, and that at least one of those who beat Mirko Kne_evi_ was identified by the police, no one was charged with his murder.

Within Eastern Slavonia, not all violent incidents have been directed against Croatian Serbs, however. Some incidents, like explosions in Croatian schools, are believed to have been caused by Croatian Serbs opposed to Croatian authority.

Tensions in Eastern Slavonia are likely to increase over coming months, when as many as 80,000 Croats who fled or were forcibly expelled from the region in 1991 could return. The Croatian displaced persons themselves feel aggrieved by their long displacement and the gross human rights violations perpetrated by the Yugoslav Army and Serbian paramilitaries in the region in 1991.

However, since in many cases their pre-war homes are inhabited by Croatian Serbs -- themselves displaced from other areas of Croatia -- return will need to be a two-way process to prevent the Croatian Serbs from leaving Croatia.

"While procedures established to regulate the return procedure have been agreed, it would not be the first time that violence and tension accompany the return of minorities to communities in other areas of the country," Amnesty International said. "Only the guarantee of a safe environment will encourage Croatian Serbs to remain in the area."

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