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OPINION PIECE ON THE LONDON CONFERENCE

Last month, diplomats from the 54 countries of the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) in Europe gathered in Vienna to congratulate themselves on a job well done in Bosnia-Herzegovina. In the Habsburg splendour of the very palace from which Bosnia was once governed, diplomatic voices spoke confidently about offices established, programs coordinated and elections organized with astonishing speed. There was mention of the occasional administrative tangle and the odd structural flaw in the OSCE mission. But the voices spoke optimistically of lessons learned and promised better management tomorrow. Some even suggested that the monitoring of human rights should become a priority next year.

Not so very far from Vienna, there were other voices to be heard that same week. The voices of local Bosnian Serb policemen telling a man that he could not cross into Republika Srpska to visit his former home near Zvornik, and that his house there had been burned down. The voices of local Bosnian Croat police urging cancellation of a visit by displaced persons to cemeteries near Mostar because they could not guarantee the safety of the visitors. The voice of a Bosnian Serb woman from the Sarajevo area reporting that she had been threatened with house eviction, and the voices of local residents who subsequently threatened violence against UN monitors investigating the incident. In northeastern Bosnia, there were the angry voices of several hundred displaced persons clashing with local residents as they attempted to return to their disputed village - a confrontation which resulted in the death of one person and injury to several others.

The right of refugees and displaced persons to return to their homes is a central provision of the Dayton peace agreement - signed just one year ago. That agreement also included a guarantee of freedom of movement for all citizens throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina. Neither of these critical components of the agreement has become a reality. Instead, displaced people are prevented from visiting their former homes. Their attempts have sometimes been met with violent attacks, which local authorities have done little or nothing to stop or prevent. Some who have managed to return to their former homes have been ordered to leave by police. In all parts of the country, remaining members of minorities have been subjected to violent evictions or threats of expulsion. Some have been allegedly beaten by police or soldiers - with little or no official response. Given these and other concerns about continuing human rights violations - including the failure of IFOR forces to seek out and arrest those suspected of war crimes, conditions in the country clearly remain unsafe for returning refugees and internally displaced people.

This week, the governments of Europe and North America gather again in London to chart a course for the next phase of the Dayton process. There is reason to be concerned that one of the results of the meeting will be a scaling down of the international community's human rights

protection activities. Critical responsibilities for human rights protection may be transferred prematurely to national institutions which are unable to cope with the task, and in some cases, are not even properly established. This is certainly no time for contemplating a reduction of commitments or any form of disengagement. If the conference fails to address meaningfully the serious shortcomings of the implementation process and to take urgent steps to protect the human rights of **all** citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina, there can be no lasting peace in the region. The Dayton Agreement will rapidly acquire the status of one of the most notable examples of late twentieth-century fiction yet produced by the international community. The memory of the tens of thousands of victims of human rights abuses during the past five years, including those “disappeared”, “missing”, killed, forcibly expelled, raped or otherwise tortured, demands nothing less than immediate action.

Anne Burley
Europe Regional Program Director - Amnesty International

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