

## **Returnees: the prevailing problem of displaced persons after the end of the returning process—focusing on Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina**

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Good afternoon, everybody. Thank you for joining our symposium. Today, I will present the topic “Returnee Problem: The Remaining Problem of Displaced Persons after the End of the Returning Process—in the Case of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.”

First of all, the focus of today’s topic is not refugees, unfortunately, so I do not know how much I can contribute towards the aim of this symposium. Nevertheless, I will try my best. Please keep in mind that the focus is not refugees but returnees.

Returnees are displaced persons who return to their place of origin. It is important to examine how they have survived after their return and analyze the remaining problems of returnees after support by international organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has ended.

Moving this slightly abstract discussion into a more concrete story, I will briefly discuss the case of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Both Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina were once units of the federal state of Yugoslavia. Thus, to begin with, I

would like to mention what Yugoslavia was like before the war. In short, it was a successfully governed, multiethnic state where prosperity and coexistence between various ethnic groups flourished long after World War II, though there were serious ethnic conflicts during the interwar period. As a result, Yugoslavia was considered to be a “model nation.”

However, the death of Tito, the outstanding leader of Yugoslavia, led to the resurgence of ethnocentrism especially in the late half of the 1980s. Then, a series of civil wars broke out when the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, the ruling party of the socialist regime, collapsed and nobody could control ethnic movements in any of the federation’s republics. These conflicts gave rise to the Yugoslav Wars that began in July 1991.

In these wars, as is well known, each ethnic group wanted to build a separate nation state. To this end, so called “ethnic cleansings” were executed by each ethnic group in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Ethnic cleansing, the notorious word literally translated as “Minzoku Joka” (in Japanese), is defined as the forced removal of one ethnic group by members of another group from a locality they regard as

their own. This resulted in an enormous number of refugees. It was estimated that there were as many as 2.2 million displaced persons.

The following picture is the cover of a 1992 issue of Time Magazine, published during the Bosnian War. This was a notorious picture depicting a concentration camp in Bosnia and Herzegovina. You can see how miserable these refugees were in this camp. Following this report, the international society began to pay more attention to this war.



The war ended with the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in November 1995. The return of displaced persons to their original places became an issue along with peacebuilding and postwar recovery. In Annex 7 of this agreement, it is written, “All refugees and displaced persons have the right freely to return to their homes of origin,” and through these words, the international society aimed to

reverse the consequences of ethnic cleansing.

So then, what was the reality of their return? According to the UNHCR, by the end of 2012, 450,000 refugees and 580,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs), had returned to their homes. The number of minorities among them was nearly 500,000. For details, please look at the statistical tables attached in the last page.

By and large, this means that almost half of the 2.2 million displaced persons returned to their place of origin. However, this is just a statistical number.

What was the reality of their return? One aspect of the reality was that the multiethnic character of the population was restored to a certain extent in various regions. The fact that half the number of refugees and IDPs returned to their place of origin was very important. The aim of the international society, that is, the reversal of the consequences of ethnic cleansing, was achieved to a certain degree, although not completely.

However, there was another aspect of the reality with regard to the place of return. Many returnees did not stay in their place of return permanently, primarily owing to the lack of economic opportunities there. Among others, the biggest reason was the shortage of job opportunities, so much so that those who have returned permanently tend to be older and live in rural areas where they depend upon agriculture. This was referred to in the UNHCR report of 2007 (UNHCR, Briefing Note on UNHCR and Annex 7 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2007).

Now, I would like to explain my point of

view. As a sociologist and researcher, I visited Bosnia many times as part of my fieldwork. Through my surveys, I encountered many returnees who remain in Bosnia despite difficulties or obstacles in various regions. Their number is small in some regions. However, they are very significant because their very existence puts the brakes on the purification of the ethnic composition of the region.

The question then becomes: How do these remaining returnees survive there and how is their life sustainable? I started the field survey by visiting various returnee areas in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The following picture is a map of the two countries. Here, I have three survey fields. The first field includes areas in Croatia where Serbs have returned. The second field consists of regions in the Republic of Serbia where Serbs reside. The third field consists of the regions of returning minorities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. I would like to share a part of my research findings connected to the theme of today's symposium.



Namely, the minorities who returned to their place of origin have remained stable in two types of regions. The first type includes regions where local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) provide solid support. The other type includes regions where minorities can elect a person who belongs to their ethnic group to the position of mayor of the municipality.

There are three local NGOs that provide strong support. The first one is called the Association of the Croat Returnees to Bosanska Posavina. This is the NGO for the Croats living in Derventa, a municipality of the Republic of Serbia. The second one is called the Association of Serbs for the Return to Mostar. This is the NGO for the Serbs living in Mostar, a municipality within the federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The third one is named the Association of Returned Citizens of Banja Luka. This is the NGO headed by Bosniaks in Banja Luka, the de facto capital of the Republic of Serbia.

Bosansko Grahovo and Drvar are the regions where members of the minorities elect the mayor of the municipality. In both towns, a Serb is elected as the mayor. The fact that their representative governs the municipality brings a sense of security to the local residents, which is also felt by the remaining returnees thus encouraging them to stay.

It has been 20 years since the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina ended. The period of reconstruction of the country is also over. However, there are some problems that still persist. At the end of 2012, it was found that

more than 107,000 refugees and displaced persons still remained in need of a durable solution in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

They are the most vulnerable individuals who cannot return to their homes for various reasons. They are the people who do not have any house or property to be reconstructed or those who have been suffering terribly from the past traumas of heavy violations of human rights such as rape or violence.

In my opinion, assistance projects should focus not only on facilitating return but also on settling refugees in their displaced locations.

Now, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the refugee problem has turned into a poverty problem. However, the social protection system in the country is still low. It is not functioning efficiently owing to the lack of adequate government institutions and necessary financial resources.

Despite this difficulty, local NGOs provide remarkable support. I would like to provide some examples of the important roles played by such NGOs.

In some villages of Drvar, residents suffered from the lack of electricity for years after their return to their place of origin. Drvar is located near Croatia. Before the war, electricity came from Croatia. Although electricity lines were destroyed in the war, the electric power company in Croatia did not repair the equipment because Croatia and Bosnia became separate countries after the war. However, the residents in the village recently obtained electricity after the installation of solar panels by their houses. In this case, the

local NGO in Drvar made a proposal for the plan and the municipality and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) split the installation cost.

The following picture is of a solar panel by a house. In most cases, it is very expensive for the electric power company to build new poles and cables covering long distances for power supply. However, installing solar panels solved this problem because electricity was supplied locally, which made it possible to supply it inexpensively. This is, therefore, a good example.



The following picture is of a person who still does not have electricity. He showed me a

candle and said that he still used it at night. He explained to me that life was really hard there.



Another example is the support provided by the local NGO in Banja Luka, namely the Association of Returned Citizens of Banja Luka. Currently, the NGO is constructing food production and metalworking factories. These will be managed directly by the NGO, which also intends to employ the returnees who have been suffering from the lack of job opportunities since their return. What is impressive is that this NGO has the strong ability to negotiate. To obtain financial resources for the construction, the NGO gathered construction materials from the governmental institutions of the federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina on the one hand and accepted a donation from the government of Turkey on the other hand.

In my opinion, nowadays, each local NGO should have the ability to make a compelling proposal and to negotiate with domestic and foreign governments to raise financial resources. The case of the NGO in Banja Luka is a good example.

However, it is impossible for NGOs alone, despite all their efforts, to solve the problems of the remaining returnees. Needless to say, the central government should take the biggest responsibility for the realization of the sustainable return and settlement of displaced persons. In my view, their biggest task is job creation for the whole nation, not just for the returnees. It is also necessary to develop a sound national economy and to promote stable economic growth, fairly distributing the benefits of such growth to the whole nation.

However, the reality of the economic systems in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina is vastly different from all expectations. Since both countries had adopted a socialist economy long before the war, they are still in the process of transitioning from a controlled economy to a market economy.

In both countries, the public sector still plays an important role in the economy. The ruling political parties exert vital influence on the affairs of the public sector. Owing to this, employment of personnel through connections, particularly under the influence of political parties, is rampant in public sector recruitments. This is one of the main causes of corruption prevalent in both countries.

The current problem in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina is the rapid growth of emigration. Particularly in Croatia, after it joined the European Union, the so-called “brain drain” or flow of highly skilled human resources, such as engineers and medical staff, has become a serious problem. This also means that the majority of each ethnic group leaves

the country in search of better jobs.

Most recently, it was estimated that 52,000 people emigrate from Croatia every year. The majority are those seeking better jobs in foreign countries. Their destinations are mainly countries within the European Union, with Germany being the most popular choice. The estimated number of migrants is enormous. Croatia is a small country whose population is only four million and 30 thousand. So that, if it happened in the same rate for the size of the population in Japan, 1 million and half people emigrate from the country.

Lastly, I would like to make a closing remark on the role of the international society and NGOs. As for the problem of the remaining returnees, their current situation calls for the provision of assistance to enable them to become independent.

At this stage, it is necessary to fund worthy projects of local NGOs after screening their proposals as I mentioned earlier. The proposal by the NGO in Drvar is a good example. Given that corruption is a big problem, transparency and anti-corruption activities should also be promoted. Monitoring activities organized by citizens and NGOs should also play an important role.

In short, the reconstruction of a post-conflict country is a long process that requires extensive, steady effort including monitoring and support.

Thank you for your kind attention.

**Table1. Total Number of Refugees and Displaced Persons who Returned to/within BiH\* as at 31 December 2012**

	Total to date	Current year
A. Returns from Abroad	450,083	273
B. Returns of Displaced Persons	580,309	357
Total Number of Returnees	1,030,392	630

Note: BiH means Bosnia and Hercegovina

**Table2. Total Number of Minority Returns (Refugees and DPs)who Returned to their Place of Origin in BiH**

	Total to date	Current year
A. Federation of BiH	275,392	66
B. Republika Srpska	173,348	541
C. Brcko District	22,095	0
Total Number of Minority Returns	470,835	607

**Table3. Refugees, Asylum Seekers and DPs in BiH**

	Total	Federation*	RS*	BD*
A. Refugees	6,919	164	6,722	33
From Croatia (Preliminary results)	6,733		6,700	33
Recognised Refugees from Serbia/Kosovo	146	124	0	0
in Collective Accomodation	20	20	0	0
From Other Countries	40	40	0	0
in Collective Accomodation	7	7	0	0
B. Asylum Seekers	42	42	0	0
From Serbia (Including Kosovo)	3	3	0	0
in Collective Accomodation	3	3	0	0
From Other Countries	39	39	0	0
in Collective Accomodation	7	7	0	0
C. Displaced Persons	103,449	41,690	61,247	512