

WORLD



Five years after the signing of the Dayton peace accord, Bosnia's internal refugees are returning in ever larger numbers. But 'home' can be a tenuous concept.

Bosnia slowly mends

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PRIJEDOR AND SREBRENICA, BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

A WHITE tent pitched on a mountain ridge; an abandoned schoolroom; a house occupied by a refugee family, whose former home is occupied by other refugees; a temporary shelter built on the site of a now vanished 300-year-old neighborhood. A solitary room – the only thing left standing amid the rubble of a bombed-out building.

Welcome home. Or welcome, that is, to the kind of ad hoc living arrangements that serve as home for thousands and thousands of people in Bosnia-Herzegovina, who are still struggling to overcome the devastating effects of war caused by the breakup of the former Yugoslavia.

Five years after the Dec. 14, 1995, signing of the Dayton peace accord in Paris, which brought an end to a conflict that created more than a million refugees, Bosnia today is a place where the concept of home – a basic human need – remains very much in flux.

There are signs of hope, as more and more refugees begin returning to homes they fled, fearing for their lives in a war fueled by ethnic hatred and marked by "ethnic cleansing" – a program often carried out by neighbor against neighbor. By the end of this year, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), some 50,000 people will have returned to their homes, approximately 20 percent more than did so in 1999. It's only a fraction of the 800,000 Bosnian Serbs, Croats, and Muslims still counted as internal refugees, or "displaced persons," with a further 300,000 people still living abroad.

But statistics don't begin to hint at the individual courage returning often requires. In the hills above Srebrenica, for example, just a few miles from the site where Serbs mas-

sacred some 7,000 to 8,000 Muslims in 1995, a few dozen Muslims have pitched tents for temporary shelter as they rebuild homes.

Hajra Mandzic is in her 90s. She lost three sons, three grandsons, three brothers, and nine nephews at Srebrenica. But she is determined to spend the bitterly cold winter in a tent on the hillside here. "Some of the building materials for my home have been delivered," she says. "And I have to stay to make sure that nothing happens to them."

In Prijedor, in northern Bosnia, where

in tents on the site where 13 homes are being rebuilt with assistance from Catholic Relief Services (CRS), a humanitarian organization.

Just a few blocks away, Nemanja Nikolic, a Serb, says he can't wait to return to his home in Sarajevo. Mr. Nikolic says he fled, believing nationalist propaganda that Muslims would kill all Serbs at the end of the war. "We were fools to leave," he now says. "It was all lies."

Like thousands of other refugees, his situation is complicated by the fact that another refugee family is living in his home in the

Bosnian capital. Although property laws that help people regain their homes are now being enforced, such returns are complicated by the fact that evicted families often have nowhere else to go, either because someone is living in their home, or because it has been destroyed.

As more Bosnians seem ready to return to their old communities, many international aid groups worry about "Bosnia fatigue" – the fact that some financial donors are losing interest here as other parts of the world flare up.

According to the UNHCR, of some 23,000 homes needing reconstruction in Bosnia this year, there were only enough funds to work on about 4,800. Earlier, the International Crisis Group, a nongovernmental organization that specializes in crisis prevention, estimated a funding shortfall of \$77 million for housing construction this year. Without money to re-

build or repair homes, say international organizations, refugees can't return – and the all-important task of restoring broken communities and rebuilding a multiethnic nation becomes that much harder.

"The opportunity is now," says Greg Auberry of CRS. "The international community needs to act now. It can't be, 'Oh, we're tired, we're not interested anymore.' The fact is, we've invested five years in this country, and we can't stop now."



HOUSING CRUNCH: Boja Dragicevic, a Croatian Serb, and her husband live in Prijedor, Bosnia. Their house is owned by a Muslim family, who want them to leave. Muslim men (top) rebuild a home in a nearby village.

Serbs slaughtered some 3,000 Muslims and held thousands more in concentration camps like "detention centers," several Muslims have returned to the Old Town. The historical district had been their community for more than 300 years until local Serbs drove them out in 1992, destroying the neighborhood mosque, as well as virtually every house.

"This place is home, this is where I want to be," says Husein Burazerovic. In his late 60s, he is one of a few dozen Muslims living



WAITING ROOM: These two Bosnian Serb men (left) are among 80 people living at a school in Trnopolje, in Serb-controlled Bosnia. Although more displaced people are going home, others say they have no means to get back, or no family to help. Humanitarian groups worry that many will not have enough food or heat this winter.



REBUILDING A COMMUNITY: Bosnian Muslim Emim Halilovic (l.), his wife (2nd l.), and their seven-year-old son (r.) get a visit from a neighbor (c.) as they rebuild their typical cinderblock and red-tiled-roof home in the mountains above Srebrenica, where Bosnian Serbs massacred as many as 8,000 Muslims during the war.



CROWDED QUARTERS: These Bosnian Muslim women live in a "collective center" – emergency housing for internal refugees – at a dormitory at the University of Tuzla. Accommodations are one family per room. Between 11,000 and 15,000 people across Bosnia still live in such centers, set up in 1995 in schools, gymnasiums, warehouses, and other structures.