

The Role of Croatia in the Management of the Humanitarian Crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina

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ABSTRACT

Croatia played a crucial role in the management and termination of the humanitarian crisis caused by the aggression of the Yugoslav Army and Serbian paramilitary forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Between 1992 and 1995, Croatia accepted three waves of refugees and cared for more than 500,000 refugees from B&H; it thus secured the basic precondition for the survival of B&H as a state. Croatia invested more than 1,000,000.000 U.S. dollars from its State budget just for the care of refugees from B&H. Even today about 130,000 Bosnian refugees are still accommodated in Croatia, for most are still unable to return to their homes. The European Community and the UN were unable to protect the lives of civilians or to prevent grave breaches of international humanitarian law. At the same time, the Croatian military operation "Storm" in 1995 saved the lives of thousands of civilians in the Bihać area. A careful analysis of the Croatian contribution to the achievement of the Dayton agreements and the resolution of the humanitarian crisis in B&H clearly reveals that the positive role of Croatia has been seriously underestimated and down-played by the international community.

The humanitarian crisis

The humanitarian crisis developed early and its prominent feature was the aggression of the Serbian-dominated Yugoslav Army and Serbian paramilitary forces on Croatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina. Three factors were crucial in creating this crisis: a systematic application of specially devised methods of ethnic cleansing; low-intensity warfare; and a complete disregard for the Geneva Convention and other international humanitarian laws.

The features of ethnic cleansing that resulted in the humanitarian crisis were as follows: the creation of huge populations of displaced persons and refugees; pervasive and terrifying effects

on the population of noncombatants caused by indiscriminate shelling of civilian targets and similar abuses of military power (including maliciously planted land-mines and booby traps); extrajudicial and arbitrary executions of innocent persons or helpless detainees; summary executions and massacres of unarmed civilians; systematic, widespread, and ethnically motivated rapes; deliberate obstruction of humanitarian corridors for endangered civilian populations; the creation of a number of *ad hoc* prisons and concentration camps; systematic torture of detained civilians and prisoners of war; and the wanton destruction and plundering of civilian property (7, 8, 13). The aggressors blatantly violated human rights and deliberately perpetrated grave breaches of the Geneva Convention and other humanitarian laws. All that resulted in immediate atrocities, and in pervasive and serious long-term psychotraumatic experiences for many of the victims. The impact of thus created humanitarian crisis was especially devastating for civilian women and children.

At the beginning, the humanitarian crisis was concentrated in the areas marked for ethnic cleansing within the framework of creating a "Greater Serbia" (such regions as "Krajina" in Croatia and "Republika Srpska" in Bosnia and Herzegovina), but its effects soon flooded the whole region. It is true that grave breaches of the Geneva Conventions (combined with the low intensity warfare) were frequently encountered in almost all conflicts during the last three decades around the world; however, ethnic cleansing has generally been perceived as a particularly prominent feature of the war in Croatia, Bosnia, and Herzegovina; also, the humanitarian and refugee crisis thus created was the largest in Europe since the World War II. As a result, that crisis was the major subject of most UN resolutions passed between 1991 and 1995, and its management was the prime concern of the joint UN and NATO forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

The role of Croatia in the management and resolution of the humanitarian crisis was crucial; Croatian authorities and institutions were already fully and effectively involved in coping with crises in 1992, i.e., significantly before the international community managed to develop and introduce workable solutions and mechanisms (such as the creation of "safe heavens," humanitarian corridors, extensive monitoring, and the continuous presence of UN forces and NGOs).

The first phase of the humanitarian crisis: the first wave of refugees and other consequences of ethnic cleansing

In April 1992, the first waves of refugees from Bosnian cities of Ravno, Kupres, Foča, Višegrad, Zvornik, Ključ, Bijeljina, Brčko, Bosanski Brod, Derвента, Prijedor, Jajce, and Kotor Varoš, arrived in Croatia (Fig. 1). At that time, Croatia already had 330.000 of

its own displaced persons settled in state-organized and private housing (9). The Croatian authorities and nation were already stretched to the limit in their efforts to secure the food and accommodations, health care, and social care for those displaced persons, as well as to preventing the collapse of the national economy and complete disorder in the social system.

In March 1992, the number of Bosnian refugees settled in Croatia was 16,579; in April 1992 it reached 193,415, in August 1992, it escalated to 363,270, and in December 1992, it peaked at 402,768. The total number of displaced persons and refugees in Croatia at the end of 1992 was more than 10% of the total Croatian population; 663,493 refugees and displaced persons on December 1, 1992, compared to the four and half million total Croatian population! That was a tremendous economic and social burden, generally regarded as critical for the stability of any state even in the time of peace – and Croatia was at that time

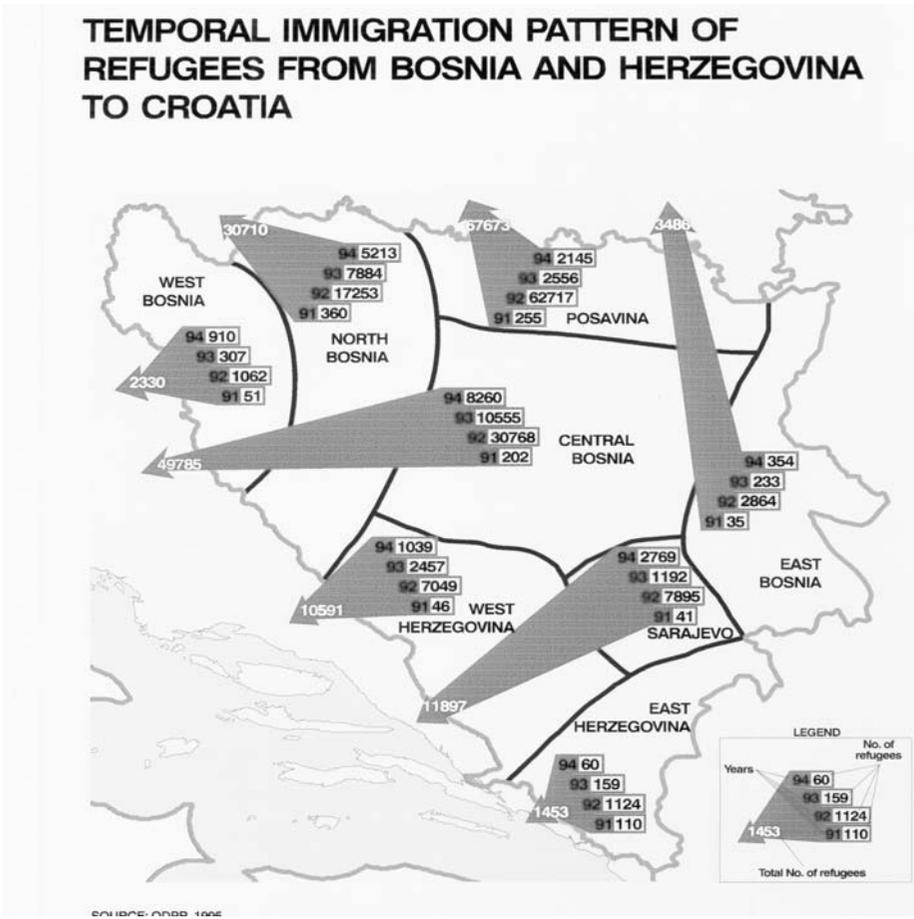


Figure 1

exposed to Serbian aggression and had almost 1/3 of its territory occupied by the Yugoslav Army and Serbian paramilitary forces.

The Croatian Government responded by establishing the Office for Refugees and its services throughout the country; add to this the maximum involvement of the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Social Care, Croatian military forces and police, Croatian Red Cross, and Caritas. These institutions, supported by a myriad of generous and self-sacrificing civilians in all Croatian cities and villages, successfully coped with the crisis and had a crucial role in the care of thousands of refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina. For example, the small town of Gunja in Eastern Slavonia, accepted so many refugees from Bijeljina, Semberija and Bosanska Posavina that the final number of settled refugees exceeded its total initial population. Gunja's heroic efforts were explicitly recognized and honored by the European Community.

The refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina were settled in institutionally provided housing and in the private homes of Croatian families. Primary health care was also provided to them, a service that placed an extreme burden on the Croatian health care system. Additional medical and psychosocial care and treatment was provided the victims of ethnic rape; Caritas provided the help for babies and infants for whom their raped and victimized mothers were unable to care. Furthermore, Croatian hospitals and medical professionals gave without stint of their time, resources and money in treating wounded civilians and soldiers from Bosnia and Herzegovina and providing medical care for sick children and the elderly. For example, just for the medical treatment of Bosnian refugees in 1992/93, the Croatian Government spent 54,320,121 U.S. dollars from the State Budget.

Simple quantitative data will serve to illustrate the dramatic scope and extent of that humanitarian crisis: within weeks, 67,763 refugees arrived from Bosanska Posavina, and another 30,710 from other parts of Northern Bosnia and Herzegovina (Fig. 1). There were occasions when about 10,000 refugees were entering war-torn Croatia in a single day (e.g., in Slavonski Brod). Some, in transit to other countries, spent about three days in Croatia. However, it is important to stress that other European countries (with the important exception of Germany) were unwilling to accept those refugees, although they did practically nothing to prevent their expulsion from their homes. While Croatia at that time was receiving up to 10,000 refugees in a single day, many European countries did not accept even 1,000 refugees during the entire period of the crisis.

What follows are the key features of the first phase of the humanitarian crisis:

In 1992, the Yugoslav Army and Serbian paramilitary forces applied in Bosnia and Herzegovina the same methods of eth-

nic cleansing they used in 1991 in Croatia. However, after their negative experience with Vukovar in Croatia, Serbian forces did not destroy the besieged enclaves in Eastern Bosnia; they just encircled them and proceeded on to conquer the remaining territory.

The international community and institutions were unable to prevent the outbreak of the humanitarian crisis and were woefully inadequate in coping with it.

The Republic of Croatia clearly demonstrated that, in spite of Serbian aggression and war-related destruction, it remained a well-organized state with an efficient administration and infrastructure; it thus managed to cope singly and successfully with the first wave of Bosnian refugees without international help. Whereas these efforts vitally contributed to the survival of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the extreme burden exacted long-term consequences for the Croatian economy and social stability.

The second wave of refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina

The second wave of refugees began arriving in Croatia during 1993; this influx was caused by the further aggression of Serbian forces, but also by the outbreak of conflict between Croats and Bosniac-Muslims in the Bosnia and Herzegovina. That conflict was a direct consequence of the successful Serbian ethnic cleansing of large parts of B&H (1, 2). Namely, thousands of Bosniac-Muslims expelled by the Serbs arrived in areas that were inhabited predominantly by Croats throughout the centuries and tried to settle there. Moreover, civilian refugees arriving in the "Croatian" enclaves of B&H were accompanied by growing numbers of Bosniac-Muslim soldiers who were unable to resist the Serbian forces and retreated along with the civilians. In effect, hundreds of thousands of Bosniac-Muslims and Croats were squeezed into a small territory that until then had been successfully defended by Croats against the Serbian forces.

Everybody was in desperate need of food and shelter, and civilians and soldiers of both ethnic groups were together in a chaotic mix. That conflicts and skirmishes broke out was perhaps inevitable. Whereas the atrocities perpetrated by Bosniac-Muslim forces forced a number of Croats to flee from Central Bosnia and the region north of Sarajevo, a number of Bosniac-Muslims were also forced by Croat forces to flee from Mostar and other places (1, 2). As a result, new waves of civilian refugees of mixed ethnic origin started again to spill over the Croatian borders.

For example, as a result of those conflicts, more than 12,000 refugees from Central Bosnia (Visoko and Kakanj) arrived in Croatia in a single day. At that time, Croatia was incapable of accommodating more refugees. The only remaining, and cer-

tainly an unprecedented solution, was to put refugees in hotels. In fact, hotels had been used to accommodate displaced persons and refugees in Croatia during 1991 and 1992, but only to a limited extent. However, in 1993, even the hotels in popular tourist sites on the seacoast were "invaded" by refugees. The economic consequences were drastic. Many hotels were so damaged - even devastated - after the prolonged use by refugees, that even today (when tourism should be the major source of income for Croatia) they cannot be properly used because of lack of money for repair and/or modernization.

The Croatian Office for refugees and other governmental agencies were fully coordinated with the activities of various NGOs, UNHCR, ICRC, and other international humanitarian organizations serving the same cause (3, 4, 5, 6). Therefore, the basic conditions of living and personal dignity were maintained for refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina who were waiting for transfer to other countries. Those efforts also enabled the gradual integration into Croatian society of the Croatian refugees expelled by Serbs from Bosanska Posavina and by the Bosniac-Muslims from Central Bosnia. The chances that those refugees will return to their homes are remote; nevertheless, they insisted on staying in Croatia; i.e., to remain close as possible to their homes (hoping one day to return), and many of them asked for and obtained Croatian citizenship.

It has to be recognized that during the second phase of the humanitarian crisis, the victims of Serbian aggression (Croats and Bosniac-Muslims) unfortunately tried to use the same methods of ethnic cleansing against each other. It was most manifest in Central Bosnia and included civilian massacres, summary executions, arbitrary killings, and the obstruction of humanitarian corridors. Depending on the local situation, the perpetrators of those grave breaches of humanitarian law were either Bosniac-Muslim or Croatian paramilitary forces. Whereas the Croats were the main victims in the region of Central Bosnia, Bosniac-Muslims faced a similar fate in the area of Mostar. For example, almost all surviving Croats from Kakanj, Visoko, and Kreševo are even today refugees settled in Croatia, and the same holds for many Croats in Central Bosnia. It is important to recognize that the UN and other international organizations failed to protect the civilian population in those areas and also were unable to secure the safety of the humanitarian corridors.

The third wave of refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina

During the last months of 1993 and into the following year, another wave of refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina crossed the Croatian border. They were the remnants of the non-Serbian civilian population from the northwestern part of Bosnia, an area

TEMPORAL IMMIGRATION PATTERN OF REFUGEES FROM NORTHERN BOSNIA VIA UNPA SECTOR WEST

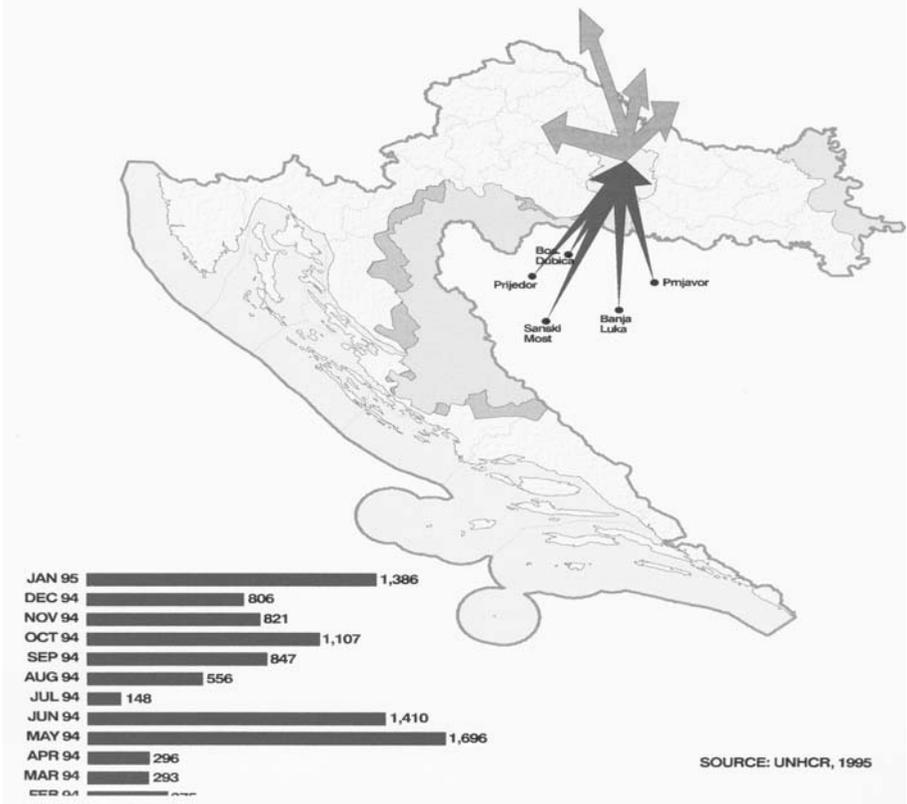


Figure 2

occupied by Serbian forces. During 1994, more than 30,000 Croats and Bosniac-Muslims from Banja Luka, Prijedor, and Kotor Varoš entered Croatia (11) (Fig. 2). The last large group crossed the Bosnian-Croatian border in the village of Davor on the river Sava in August 1995. That act of ethnic cleansing was the revenge taken by the Serbian forces after their defeat in the large-scale military operation "Storm"; as a result, another 22,000 refugees entered Croatia in less than a month.

At the same time, another group of Bosniac-Muslims, (about 20,000) left Velika Kladuša and simply entered Croatia and settled in the area of Kupljensko near Vojnić. The area of Velika Kladuša and Cazin (north of Bihać) was where bitter and prolonged fighting occurred between two fractions of Bosniac-Muslim forces; those who were defeated fled to Croatia, fearing revenge by the winning fraction of Bosniac-Muslims. For Croatian authorities, the event was not just another serious financial burden, but

DISTRIBUTION OF DISPLACED PERSONS AND REFUGEES (on January 12, 1995)

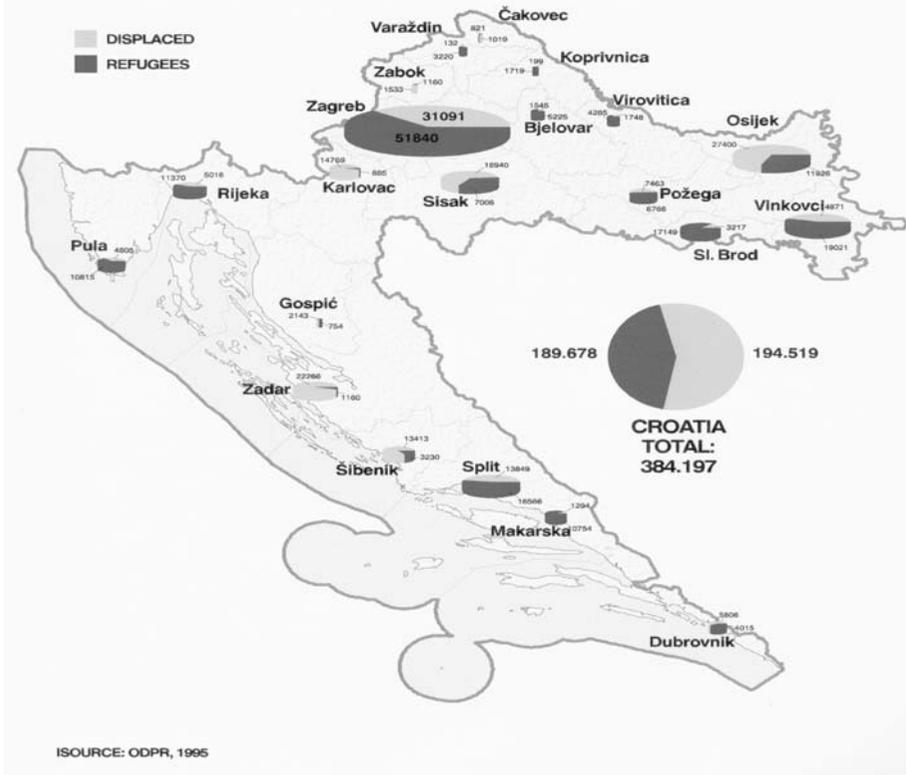


Figure 3

also a potential source of social and political tensions in that part of Croatia. For this was a special case; one was not dealing with the usual refugees, but with armed persons who insisted on receiving political asylum in Croatia.

The situation was equally bizarre from the military and political point of view as it was hyper-dramatic from the humanitarian point of view, and caused Croatia multiple problems. Fortunately, after weeks of hard negotiations, (conducted jointly by UNHCR and governments of Croatia and Turkey), about 16.000 refugees returned to the area of Cazin and Velika Kladuša, where trilateral police forces assumed their safety. However, the remaining several thousand of Bosniac-Muslim refugees refused to return to Velika Kladuša, thus exerting an additional burden on the already fragile Croatian economy and health care system. That case most clearly defines how consistently and positively the Croatian government and people coped with the humanitarian crisis during

the war period, despite military and political pressure exerted from all sides.

The period from 1992 to 1995 saw great fluctuations in the number of refugees in Croatia, mostly because refugees were leaving for other countries; few of them returned to Bosnia and Herzegovina (Fig. 3). From the autumn of 1995, new refugees entered Croatia only sporadically and in small groups. 1996 onwards saw the extremely slow and protracted return of refugees to the newly established Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The newly established balance of military power and the much increased presence of UN forces after the Dayton agreement made that return possible, (but not efficient).

The last phase of the humanitarian crisis

The last phase of the humanitarian crisis occurred during the time when the population of the Bihać area was facing extinction under the brutal assaults of the Yugoslav Army and Serbian paramilitary forces. These Serbian forces had shortly before perpetrated the huge massacre of Bosniac-Muslims in Srebrenica, despite the presence of numerous UN forces which had been reinforced by NATO troops. The UN concept of “safe heavens” was at best completely inefficient in protecting civilians, and it was apparent that the same fate was imminent for Bihać.

The large-scale Croatian military operation “Storm” saved Bihać from destruction. Although the primary goal of the “Storm” operation was to liberate those parts of Croatia still occupied by Serbian paramilitary forces (so-called Krajina), the opening of the safe corridor to Bihać was also a major goal of the operation. “Storm” is the best illustration of the positive role of the Croatian military forces in terminating the humanitarian crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina, a crisis which was about to turn from the widespread tragedy into a total catastrophe.

The total victory of the Croatian forces over the Serbian paramilitary forces in Croatia, and in the neighbouring Bosnian towns of Drvar, Grahovo, Glamoč and Mrkonjić Grad, was crucial to the successful completion of the Dayton agreements. As most representatives of the international community have systematically neglected the vital role of Croatia in the termination of the war and humanitarian crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is important to stress the immediate and positive effects of the Croatian military operation “Storm”: (a) It enabled the establishment of peace as a necessary prerequisite for the return of refugees and displaced persons to their homes; (b) It promptly eliminated the suffering of the civilian population, for humanitarian corridors were finally opened and intensely used; (c) It hastened the release of a large number of detainees from prisons and concentration camps;

and (d) It intensified the search for missing persons and/or mortal remains.

The drama of Bihać and its successful termination by Croatian military forces illustrates two important points: The Yugoslav Army and Serbian paramilitary forces were determined to pursue vigorously the policy of ethnic cleansing as long as there was even a slight chance to establish "Greater Serbia"; and decisive military action is the only effective way to terminate the suffering of civilians population in isolated and besieged enclaves exposed to brutal aggression. One must conclude, therefore, that the role played by the Croatian military operation "Storm" in the successful termination of the war and humanitarian crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina has been systematically underestimated. Those who underestimate the positive role of Croatia probably have a hidden political agenda, and thus view a strong and stable Croatian state and army as a threat to their interests in the region.

The Current situation and the role of Croatia in alleviating the consequences of the humanitarian crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina

The role of Croatia remains important today for these reasons. Croatia has allowed Serbian refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina to remain in the formerly occupied Eastern Slavonia and Baranja (these are the Serbs from Bosnia who entered that part of Croatia when it was occupied by Serbian paramilitary forces). This humane policy has caused significant social tensions in Croatia, but it has also helped the efforts of the international community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the return of large numbers of Serbs would increase instability. Furthermore, the Croatian government and people still bear the costs of accommodation, food, and health care for almost 120,000 Croatian refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina. On one hand, the Croatian state budgeted supplies and monies for rebuilding the destroyed houses of Croatian Serbs who fled to the Serbian part of B&H (Republika Srpska). On the other, Croatia is unjustly burdened with financing the accommodation of the Croats who were expelled from Bosnia and Herzegovina and still cannot return because of the inertness, sloth and negligence of the UN forces and international community (12).

The response of the international community has been insensitive, if not openly immoral. Namely, Croatian refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina have settled in houses and/or apartments of Serbs who left Croatia, simply because no other place was available for the constantly arriving refugees. Now, the international community is exerting a constant and heavy pressure on Croatian authorities to evict the Croats from the Serbian homes; but at the same time, UN and NATO forces do nothing to secure

the safe return of these exiled Croats to their homes in Bosnia and Herzegovina. So the vicious irony is that Croatia must support large numbers of Serbs from B&H, while, and at the same time, it provides care for more than 100,000 Croats who are unable to return to B&H. These goings-on greatly enhance the return of Bosniac-Muslims to their homes in B&H; and it is clear that the efforts of the international community are focused almost exclusively on realizing that goal.

However, neither Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, or Croats in Croatia benefited from that policy, however, the Croatian state is being financially and politically punished for being helpful and cooperative. As there are still many displaced persons in Croatia, whose homes and property were completely destroyed by Serbian aggression, this policy is certain to cause serious social and political tensions and destabilize Croatia. Whereas its citizens of Croatia that Croatia bears the heaviest economical and social burden in helping to alleviate the consequences of the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, they simply cannot understand why they should be hostages of the political situation in the former Yugoslavia. One hopes that the international community is not intentionally blind to the absurdity of this situation. Clearly, the international community should objectively evaluate the role of Croatia; and, at the same time, it should provide the means to resolve the humanitarian crisis. Giving token financial help only prolongs – not solves – the refugee problem.

Conclusions

The purpose of this article was to discuss and highlight the crucial role of Croatia in the management and termination of the humanitarian crisis caused by the aggression of the Yugoslav Army and Serbian paramilitary forces in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The efforts of Croatia, especially in the first phase of the crisis, were much more substantial than the efforts of the international community and other neighbouring countries.

Between 1992 and 1995, Croatia accepted and cared for more than 500,000 refugees from B&H; it thus secured the basic precondition for the survival of B&H as a state – the survival of the major part of its civilian population.

The Croatian military operation “Storm” in 1995 saved the lives of thousands of civilians in the Bihać area, as well as demonstrated the most efficient way of dealing with humanitarian disasters in isolated and besieged enclaves. Although it was apparent that “Storm” was the only workable solution, the international community did not apply it Vukovar, Srebrenica, and Sarajevo, despite the presence of UN troops. The inertness of the UN machinery and the endless deliberations of NATO, and especially the lack of decisive initiative during the first phase of war, were

prime generators of the humanitarian crisis and contributed to the tragic results. The European Community and the UN were unable to protect the lives of civilians or to prevent grave breaches of international humanitarian law. On the other hand, the international community did deliver food and similar basic humanitarian needs; this occurred, however, only in situations and areas with a low risk of armed engagement, or when the humanitarian convoys were protected by disproportionately strong armed forces.

Although at war, Croatia invested heroic efforts in alleviating the humanitarian crisis in B&H. The socioeconomic burden of those efforts was tremendous – Croatia invested more than 1,000,000.000 U.S. dollars from its State budget just for the care of refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Even today, Croatia plays a key role in repairing the consequences of the humanitarian crisis. Namely, about 130,000 Bosnian refugees are still accommodated in Croatia, for most are still unable to return to their homes. Conversely, international pressure on Croatia to speed up the return of Serbs from B&H or Yugoslavia back into Croatia, is a constant source of social and political tensions and a heavy economic burden. In comparison, the help which Croatia receives from the European community and other countries is at best symbolic.

A careful analysis of the Croatian contribution to the achievement of the Dayton agreements and the resolution of the humanitarian crisis in Bosnia and Herzegovina clearly reveals that the positive role of Croatia has been seriously underestimated and down-played by the international community. Moreover, the biased focus of the international community on the role of Croatia in the unreasonable, but probably unavoidable, conflicts between the two victims of Serbian aggression - Croats and Bosniac-Muslims - has obliterated the obvious fact that Croatia had the crucial role in saving the lives of half a million inhabitants of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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