

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

Human Rights Centre

CROATIA

Quarterly report

(Period covered: November 2003 to January 2004)

Udgivet marts 2004

23/3-04

1. Executive summary

The reporting period was marked by a high level of activity in Croatian public life, as well as in the Human Rights Centre's activities.

The focus of activities was on the organization of a round-table discussion about the implementation of the Constitutional Law on National Minorities that took place immediately before the parliamentary elections and the NGO Forum on the return of refugees and displaced persons in early December. The Centre continued its efforts to finalize the Centre's web-based digital human rights library. Finally, due to the approaching termination of technical co-operation project between the Croatian Government and OHCHR on 31 December 2003, the Centre was involved in meetings on its future legal status.

2. Human rights context

The parliamentary elections held on 23 November 2003 resulted in a significant political change. The Social-Democratic Party (SDP)-lead coalition Government was defeated by a relatively narrow margin by the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ). In the period immediately following the elections, the HDZ succeeded in forming alliance, including the SDSS (the Serbian Democratic Independent Party) and the Pensioner's Party. This alliance holds a narrow majority in the new assembly of the Croatian Parliament. Almost all members of the new Government are HDZ members.

The HDZ political program underlines the importance of human rights and the rights of national minorities. In order to get the support of the SDSS, HDZ signed a comprehensive agreement regarding the process of refugee return and full respect of the rights of the Serbian minority in line with the Constitutional Law on National Minorities that was passed in December 2002. In the course of December and January, media reported Prime Minister Ivo Sanader voicing his support for the return process, the rights of national minorities, and full cooperation with the ICTY. According to comments in national and international media, the agreement with the SDSS and the conditions placed in front of the Croatian Government by the European Union, including full co-operation with ICTY, set precise benchmarks and timeframes for assessing Croatia's performance.

3. Human rights activities and events

The Government's activities related to human rights were reduced during the reporting period. Many higher-ranking public officials were campaigning throughout November, while in December 2003 and January 2004 the newly elected authorities were occupied with the restructuring of the Government, a process which still has not been fully completed. As a result of the restructuring process the number of Ministries has been reduced, and there have been some changes of ministerial mandates.

3.1. Activities

On 11 November, the Centre organized an expert round table discussion on the implementation of the Constitutional Law on National Minorities within the context of the upcoming elections. The round table discussion was attended by Government officials, minority representatives, human rights NGOs, university lecturers and other experts. The absence of the representative of the State Electoral Commission was noted. At a late stage, and following a public initiative by GONG, a NGO specialized in election observation and election procedures, it was decided that the additional elections for Minority Councils as well as the elections for additional minority representatives in local and municipality councils (taking place in line with the Constitutional Law on National Minorities and the results of the new Census that was made public in June 2002) would not take place together with the parliamentary elections. Some participants voiced their concern that by organizing the elections separately could result in an even lower voter turn-out rate.

In December, the Centre organized a NGO Forum on the return process together with the Legal Service Coalition entitled «*The Process of Return of Refugees and Displaced Persons: Technical or Principled Issue?*». The Government representatives pointed to the number of registered returns mentioned in the «*Governmental Report on the Return Process from 2000 to September 2003*» as well as in UNHCR reports, while NGO noted the cases of double occupancy and illegal occupancy that have still not been resolved.

3.2. Speakers series

The Human Rights Centre co-organized an event with UNAIDS and the NGO Iskorak to commemorate World AIDS Day in December. In January, the Centre and the Memorial Centre Jasenovac co-organized a Speaker Series event to commemorate the Day of Remembrance of the Holocaust. Since this was the first time the Holocaust was officially commemorated in Croatia, the Centre opened an exhibition about the Holocaust donated by the Civic Committee for Human Rights.

3.3. Human rights library

The Centre continued to develop its classical human rights library and finalized its own web site, which will gradually become a digital human rights library. On the site (www.human-rights.hr), one can already find an address book with over 120 active NGO's as well as human rights-related laws, documents and reports from governmental, non-governmental, regional and international sources.

3.4. Provision of conference facilities

The Centre continued to be frequently used by governmental as well as non-governmental organizations for human rights-related meetings, seminars, press-conferences or trainings. By the end of 2003, the Centre has come to be recognized by practically all relevant actors as a neutral forum for constructive discussions on human rights issues, as well as a useful resource centre.

4. Cooperation with others

During the reporting period, the Human Rights Centre cooperated with United Nations agencies (UNLO, UNDP, UNICEF, UNHCR), International Organizations (OSCE, European Commission, Council of Europe), bilateral embassies (including U.S., Norway, Sweden, Finland, France), Government bodies and numerous NGOs. The OSCE Mission in Croatia organized biweekly coordination meetings about current issues that were attended by representatives of UNLO, UNHCR, EUMM and the Human Rights Centre. In addition, UNDP initiated regular coordination meetings with the Centre.

5. Impact and achievement

The Human Rights Centre secured broad recognition as a place for serious and constructive discussion on current human rights issues, including the implementation of the Constitutional Law on National Minorities and the return process. The Centre is recognized as such by the vast majority of human rights NGOs and the wider NGO community in Croatia. Further progress has been made in raising awareness of the Government and International Organizations that they can use the Human Rights Centre as a resource centre for human rights related activities. The completion of the internet page will facilitate future activities in this regard.
