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Statement prepared by:

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Mr. Moderator, your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to address this meeting.

I represent the Center for Peace, Legal Advice and Psychosocial Assistance – Vukovar, a Croatian non-governmental organization working on the protection of human rights with the emphasis on the rights of refugees and displaced persons, as well as national / ethnic minorities.

I would like to bring to your attention five specific areas in which the Croatian Government has failed to ensure full and effective social integration of ethnic Serbs displaced during the 1990s war.

The implementation of two programs intended to provide housing assistance for potentially more than 30,000 families who used to hold occupancy / tenancy rights, almost exclusively displaced urban Serbs, could be considered a complete failure. So far, they have had less than minimum impact on repatriation and provided the target group without housing solutions.

More than ten years after the war, the issues of displaced Serbs property rights have not been resolved. In a number of cases, displaced Serbs still face major difficulties in access to peaceful enjoyment of their property such as residential units, agricultural land and business premises allocated to temporary occupants by the State administration.

Recognition and access to a variety of other acquired rights such as, for example, the validation of working years spent in Serb controlled areas remain problematic as well.

Ethnic Serbs remain largely under-represented in judiciary and the state administration although the Constitutional Law for the Protection of National Minorities guarantees proportional representation of minorities in these sectors. The authorities have so far not taken sufficient measures to put these provisions in practice.

There are allegations of discrimination against ethnic Serbs in accessing employment in the public sector. Possible discrimination is difficult to prove due to the lack of relevant data disaggregated by ethnicity and comprehensive monitoring mechanisms. Although the Croatian Government has announced the adoption of the National Strategy for Combating all Forms of Discrimination at the beginning of 2005, the document has to date not been adopted.

In January of this year, the Croatian government has joined the regional initiative for closing the refugee file by the end of 2006. The Government drafted its national strategy (Road Map) under this initiative in a non-transparent way and without consultation with relevant NGOs.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

This non-exhaustive list of problems shows that, despite the progress achieved in the previous period, practical measures taken by Croatian authorities towards effective social integration and sustainable repatriation of ethnic Serbs remain insufficient and inappropriate.

Thus, the Center for Peace urges Croatian government to:

- Implement the housing programs targeting former occupancy / tenancy rights holders and secure access to peaceful enjoyment of properties belonging to displaced Serbs without further delays
- Without further delays, ensure full and effective inclusion and participation of minorities in all spheres of public life in accordance with the Constitutional Law for the Protection of National Minorities and relevant international standards e.g. the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities; International Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination and the UN Declaration on Minorities
- Take a more proactive and constructive approach in the regional efforts towards appropriate closure of the refugee file in accordance with the provisions of the January 2005 Sarajevo Declaration
- To protect private property and acquired rights pursuant to the provisions of the Annex G of the Treaty on Succession of Former Yugoslavia

The Center for Peace calls on the European Union to:

- Prioritize the respect for minority rights and fulfillment of Croatia's international commitments within the future negotiation framework for Croatia's EU membership

The Center for Peace suggests to the OSCE to:

- Keep its field presence and continue the mandate of the OSCE Mission to Croatia as long as sustainable progress in the implementation of relevant international and national standards is not ensured and achieved

Thank you for your attention,

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