

## Minister of Communities and Return and UNHCR Welcome Returnees to Llapla Sellë/Laplje Selo

On 15 January the first nine Kosovo Serb displaced families beneficiaries of the “Voluntary Return and Reintegration in Llapla Sellë/Laplje Selo project” went back to Kosovo in Gracanicë/a municipality and received the keys of their new apartments.

The “Voluntary Return and Reintegration in Llapla Sellë/Laplje Selo” project, which started at the end of 2008, is one of the major projects of organized voluntary return funded and implemented by the Ministry of Community and Returns. It is based on a 2008 concept paper drafted in cooperation with UNHCR and it consists of the construction of three collective buildings and infrastructures for a total of 60 apartments. The apartments, some already assigned, will benefit a total of 60 families, including 54 Internally Displaced families and six vulnerable families.

Despite the harsh cold, the 20 returnees received a warm welcome by the Minister of Communities and Return, Saša Rasić, Minister for Labour and Social welfare, Nenad Rasić, Ministry staff, the Mayor of Gracanicë/a, Bojan Stojanovic, the Chief of UNHCR in Kosovo, Herman

Stuurwold and the Field Officers for the Pristina region.

The families were very happy to receive their new homes after many difficult years of displacement in collective centres in Serbia. They entered the brand new building, equipped with all the needed furniture provided by the Ministry. UNHCR provided food assistance and additional non-food items including blankets, kitchen set and hygienic kits.

The Minister of Communities and Return, Saša Rasić, underlined the commitment of his Ministry and of the Gracanicë/a Municipality, along with other Kosovo institutions, in supporting the economic integration of the returnees. “We will do our best in helping these families and we hope that also the Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare will be able to assist them as well,” he said. “We will continue to work on the reconstruction of housing for those that are genuinely interested to return to Kosovo.” The Mayor of Gracanicë/a, Bojan Stojanovic, assured that “the Municipality will work on providing conditions that may reflect perspective for those that might decide to return”.

UNHCR Kosovo Chief of Mission, Herman Stuurwold, expressed the UNHCR satisfaction at this momentous occasion. “It is really positive to see nine families voluntarily coming home to Kosovo.” He believed that this return, combined with the strong showing of returns in 2009,



*From the left: UNHCR Chief and Minister Rasić welcoming returnees*

signalled a positive trend. “It is becoming more and more ‘routine’ that people decide to return”, he said. “We are pleased that we have 1,153 voluntary returnees during 2009, and we hope that this year will show still more returns.”

A key challenge for projects such as Llapla Sellë/Laplje Selo is the selection of beneficiaries. Given the sensitivity of this activity, the selection of the families was undertaken through a commission comprised of the Ministry of Community and Returns, UNHCR, the Pristina Municipal Return Officers, the Municipal Community Officer of Gracanicë/a, the village leader of Lapla Sellë/Laplje Selo, the Office of the Prime Minister, and UNIJA-M (Association of IDPs in Kosovo). The observers on the commission were OSCE, UNDP, International Civilian Officer, British Embassy and the US Embassy.

A second group of displaced people is expected to return in February, joining this group of returnees and to restart a new life in Kosovo.

### Contents

- 2 Voluntary Return
- 4 Return and Sustainability
- 4 Go and See Visits
- 5 Delivery of Assistance

# Voluntary Return

## First Kosovo Albanian Returnees to Northern Mitrovica/a



*The Rama Family*

From the hill of Kroi I Vitaku you can see all Mitrovicë/a, both the north and the south. The falling snow makes the atmosphere surrealistic and quiet... The situation for residents is now more encouraging as compared to the difficult time born by this location until a few weeks ago. This small village in the north of Kosovo, which hosted around 150 Kosovo Albanian families before the war, is today a return site that has faced moments of tension between the Kosovo Albanian returnees and the neighbouring Kosovo Serbian community. But despite the initial problems, the first six families of voluntary returnees arrived at the end of 2009 and the new year has seen the situation calm down.

The Rama family is one of the first returnee families to Kroi I Vitaku. They returned on 3 December 2009, when,

driver for the Trepca mining Company. In displacement, we were just guests; we had to pay a rent and with eight children, five girls and three boys, it was not easy. But now we have our house," he says smiling. His smile also makes the face of Xhafer's wife, Hyra, shine. "I felt a foreigner before, now I'm at home", she says. "When I wake up in the morning I'm happy, because I can take care of my house, of my family." "Every day I receive a lot of visitors, people coming here to congratulate us for being back home."

Xhafer lives in his new house in Kroi I Vitaku with his wife,

after eight years of displacement in south Mitrovicë/a, they entered their new house. "I came on Friday", tells Xhafer, the 63 years old head of family, "and on Sunday the whole family was together back home. I'm retired now but I have been

father, two sons, and one daughter. Just one son works in south Mitrovicë/a, while the other sons are still studying. "We feel secure. The police are patrolling and if we need something we just take a taxi and go to shop in the South. Unfortunately the village is a little bit isolated and for this reason it can be boring for the young people," add Xhafer. "But the most important thing is that we are back to our previous place and that we feel safe."

While they were speaking, it stopped snowing and some sun rays entered the small white house on the top of the hill.

'Kroi' in Albanian means 'source', 'spring,' and this small community of returnees represents a source of hope for all minorities in Kosovo: that there is hope for a better future for the displaced in their homes, wherever that home is located and despite its difficulties.



*The new houses on the top of Kroi I Vitaku*

# Voluntary Return

## Four Kosovo Ashkalia Returnee Families Start a New Life in Shtime/Stimlje after Ten Years of Displacement in Skopje

All seven children of the four Shabani families from Shtime/Stimlje were born in Skopje, FYRoM; their parents were seeking refuge from violence in Kosovo in September 1999. Six weeks ago those children came to the mixed neighbourhood of Shtime/Stimlje for the first time.

Now they have a home in the same place where their parents used to live before the displacement.

The Kosovo Ashkalia families expressed their willingness to return in 2009, and from that moment, UNHCR intensified its efforts in order to make the return possible. With the essential assistance of the municipal officials and of the Kosovo Police, the property issues were solved. The house reconstructions in Shtime/Stimlje started in August 2009. In addition to the municipal authorities' involvement, the Ministry of Communities and Return together with UNDP were instrumental in supporting the building of the houses.

The 24 members of the Shabani families returned to their home town in December.

Xhejlane is the eldest woman among the returnees, but, despite her age, she can not hide her joy. Welcoming a group of visitors, she relates in a lively manner: "In Skopje it was not easy to move from one place to the other, while here I feel at home. During the displacement we suffered because of the poor living conditions and, even though we received assistance from UNHCR, the lack of



*Some Ashkalia returnee women with their children*

proper housing was a continuous source of trouble for us."

While for Xhejlane the surroundings are well-known, the children still need to become familiar with the place. However, they see no obstacles to move around. "For some time we have been living in a camp as well as having stayed in several private accommodations", said Bujar, who is 21 years old. He finished primary school, but could not continue his studies. More fortunate is Visar, a young boy of 16, who had the opportunity to complete eleven grades. However, he is not sure to be able to complete his education in Shtime/Stimlje. "Visar could not get an official certificate attesting his education level," said Xhejlane. The lack of documentation often represents a big obstacle for the social inclusion and other opportunities including study and

employment. Fortunately, all the members of these returnee families possess civil documents and are therefore able to access social services.

Immediately after the families entered their new houses, UNHCR delivered part of the harmonized package. The package includes a six month food assistance, furniture, electric stove, refrigerator, laundry machine and other belongings that will allow them to live in dignified conditions. UNHCR also supported the returnees with some firewood, an important item given the cold winter season.

For making the return sustainable, the families, including the receiving community, will benefit from income generation projects.

# Return and Sustainability

## Brekoc/Brekovac: a Lively Return Site

Brekoc/Brekovac is a village close to Gjakova/Djakovica, but the proximity from the city makes it a sort of suburb of the town.

On 15 January two Kosovo Egyptian families comprising twelve members voluntarily returned to Brekoc/Brekovac.

They came back home after more than ten years in displacement in Montenegro. UNHCR facilitated the return of the families including logistics support.

The return site is primarily inhabited by members of minority communities. Although Brekoc/Brekovac still has some destroyed houses, one can see that there are also new roofs indicating that reconstruction work is on going and that the displaced community is returning. Both the local and international communities are working hard in order to create conducive conditions for the return of other families.

Most of the minorities' families that left Brekoc/Brekovac in 1999 found shelter in Montenegro. The displaced are generally accommodated in private housing, but some of the families are living in the Konik refugee camp, near Podgorica. Those in Konik have particularly difficult living conditions. Recently, representatives from the local authorities in Gjakova/Djakovica, UNHCR, the Ministry for Communities and Return and other partners have visited the displaced from Brekoc/Brekovac in order to inform them of the return opportunities.

The return of these two Kosovo Egyptian families combined with the sustainability of those that previously returned (in 2009 15 individuals returned to this village) is a good sign for the other displaced persons which will convey stronger than words alone that return is a real option and that better living conditions in Kosovo is possible.



*Children playing in the Community Center of Brekoc/Brekovac*

In addition to the houses, a Community Center was reconstructed with funds from the World Bank and the support of the local community, Gjakova/Djakovica Municipal Assembly and the Community Development Fund (CDF). The Center is a lively location where children and youth from the local communities can gather and attend educational programmes.

## Go and See Visits

### A View of the Obiliq/c Return Site

Obiliq/c municipality had a robust number of minority returnees in 2009; both to rural areas and to the town itself. Last year, it received 62 individual returnees that were assisted with housing reconstruction and furniture. The voluntary return to Obiliq/c will continue throughout 2010.

On 28 January the Obiliq/c Municipality along with UNHCR, Danish Refugee Council, KAAD, OSCE, Kosovo Police, KFOR representatives and other actors working on the return issues took part in a 'Scout mission' in order to visit the properties of some Kosovo Roma and Ashkalia persons

displaced in Serbia, with a view to a planned Go and See Visit. The delegation met with the former neighbours of the displaced people, which greatly assisted in identifying the properties of potential returnees to Obiliq/c.

In January UNHCR and the Danish Refugee Council organized Go and See Visits for Kosovo Roma internally displaced persons to Përlepnice/Prilepnica in Gjilan/Gnjilane, for thirteen Kosovo Serbs to Dugajevë/Dugonjive, Klinë/Klina municipality and for six Kosovo Egyptian displaced persons to Gjakovë/Djakovica municipality.

Through UNHCR support in 2009 there were 76 Go and See Visits organized that benefitted 790 individuals.



*UNHCR Officers with Community's representatives in Obiliq/c*

# Delivery of Assistance

## Urban Return: A Kosovo Roma Family Receives Assistance after its Voluntary Return to Gjilan/Gnjilane Town

Since 2005, 41 Kosovo Roma families returned to Gjilan/Gnjilane town, where the security situation and the freedom of movement for the Kosovo Roma residents appear to be continuously improving. The returnees can access basic health services and the

primary school students are attending classes at the Roma School located in Gjilan/Gnjilane town.

On 14 January a Kosovo Roma family of four members returned to Gjilan/Gnjilane town after being registered by UNHCR Skopje office.

As usual, upon their return the family received all necessary support by UNHCR, KAAD, Gjilan/Gnjilane Municipality, and the Danish Refugee Council. In particular, the family received food, non-food items, fire wood and furniture items.

## Vulnerable Displaced Family Received Assistance



UNHCR Officer delivering fire wood in Shtërpce/Strpce

UNHCR continues to conduct needs assessments for internally displaced persons within Kosovo and responds by delivering support when appropri-

ate. UNHCR and Danish Refugee Council delivered firewood to 52 internally displaced persons, refugees and extremely vulnerable families in the Collective Center "Lahor", in Shtërpce/

ate. UNHCR has frequently stepped in during the winter season to provide firewood for needy IDPs. Such was the case on 14 January, when

Strpce municipality. The list of beneficiaries was prepared in close coordination with the Red Cross and the Shtërpce/Strpce Municipal Returns Officer.

Recently, UNHCR assisted with a furniture donation to the family of Cuckic Novica, a Kosovo Serb displaced from Gjilan/Gnjilane town and currently living with his wife Ljubica and two children in a school in Shillovë/Silovo village. The family lives there because they believe their house located near a church in Gjilan/Gnjilane town is too unsafe for return. Being an extremely vulnerable family, the Deputy Mayor and the Municipality Return Officer committed the Municipality of Gjilan/Gnjilane to provide financial support to them.

VOLUNTARY RETURNS TO KOSOVO	
2008	679 persons
2009	1153 persons (+ 70% vs 2008)
2010*	185 persons

\* 1<sup>st</sup> January up to end of January