Paper presented at Conference on Displacement, Transitional Justice and Reconciliation

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Has return been sustainable in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina? What factors undermine and contribute to reintegration, sustainable return and reconciliation? Huma Haider recently presented on these issues in Ottawa.

The Conference on Displacement and Reconciliation (9-10 June) took place at Saint Paul University in Ottawa, Canada. Haider's paper, 'Return in Divided Societies: Restoring Coexistence and Promoting Reintegration in Bosnia and Herzegovina', explores return and reconciliation in the country; obstacles to durable return; the notion of 'home'; and efforts to promote reintegration.

Prior to the 1992–1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Bosniaks, Serbs and Croats shared neighbourhoods and friendships. The war, through its objective and effect, divided these communities and groups. Post-conflict, the physical return of displaced persons and refugees was, and remains, insufficient to renew coexistence. Moreover, the weak economy aggravates divisions, further impeding sustainable return and reconciliation. Recognising these difficulties, the UNHCR – the UN refugee agency - launched 'Imagine Coexistence,' a series of activities designed to rebuild trust among ethnic groups in areas of return. Many of the activities involved an income-generating component.

Haider's paper reviews this and other similar initiatives that aim to promote livelihoods, community development and coexistence concurrently. It finds that such projects have achieved successes in repairing social relationships, addressing poverty and promoting sustainable return in BiH. They have, however, received limited attention and funding. Actors involved in the return process have generally equated 'home' with property. This has neglected the notion of 'home' as not only a physical place of residence, but also a site of social and cultural relations and a place that provides well-being, opportunities and hope for the current and next generation. She argues that initiatives that aim to bridge divided societies and provide economic opportunities should be given greater prominence in BiH and more generally in the design of interventions to address displacement, transitional justice and reconciliation.

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