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BOSNIA-HERZEGOVINA

FIRST PERSON

A Refugee Returns and Rebuilds

Despite hardship and lack of work, a refugee family comes back home



Photo: USAID/Kristina Stefanova

Enisa Hamulic and her 12-year-old daughter Erma sit outside of the home her husband rebuilt in Prijedor, Bosnia.

At 66, Said Hamulic has lost all hope of retirement, but he knew he needed to return home. “I wanted to be on my own land,” he said.

One rainy August afternoon in Prijedor, a town in northwestern Bosnia and Herzegovina, Said Hamulic wearily made his way home after spending the day digging a road and helping neighbors rebuild their houses. His wife, pregnant with their third child, was waiting for him.

This is the life of 23,000 Muslim Bosniaks who returned home years after they were expelled by war. Unemployment is high, and almost everyone is rebuilding destroyed homes, roads, and water and electric systems. USAID has helped returnees like the Hamulics by providing construction materials, delivering power and water, and giving them seeds, agriculture tools, and livestock.

Prijedor — which witnessed some of the war’s worst atrocities — is a Serb stronghold and its returnees are Bosniak. Returning Bosniaks remember being forced out of their homes. Some were arrested or sent to concentration camps, others escaped. Said and his wife Enisa were lucky — they escaped to Croatia and later to Germany.

The couple returned to Prijedor with two young daughters to find their home — and those of their neighbors — burnt to the ground. Their livestock was gone and the corn field was leveled. With help from USAID, they worked hard to rebuild their home and restore electricity and water. At 66, Said has lost all hope of retirement, but he knew he needed to return home. “I wanted to be on my own land,” he said. “Many others were returning and we wanted to be close to our friends and relatives.”

USAID started helping returnees by repairing large infrastructure to jumpstart the economy. As people began returning, USAID refocused on small-scale community projects to encourage more returns, repairing hundreds of water and wastewater systems, power plants, schools, and clinics. USAID helped rebuild four border-crossing bridges and a railroad leading to Croatia, as well as an internal highway damaged by heavy war vehicles.

The work never seems to end, but the Hamulics are happy to be home. And they are in good company — about half of the 45,000 Bosniaks who left Prijedor have come back with them.