

# NO PLACE LIKE HOME : THE RETURN OF DISPLACED Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian FAMILIES TO KOSOVO

## TRANSCRIPT

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**[NARRATOR]**

Thousands of people from the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities fled Kosovo during the conflict in 1999, and sought refuge in neighboring countries. Fifteen years later, some 8,000 people are still displaced in Montenegro and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. The vast majority are willing to integrate into their new societies. But around 200 families want to return to Kosovo.

These families are extremely vulnerable. And their living conditions can be dire especially in the camps of Konik, in Montenegro, and Suto Orizare, in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

Sherif Ramadani fled Kosovo in 1999, ten days after the bombing started. He and his family dealt with years of forced movements and uncertainty. He is currently living in Suto Orizare, close to Skopje.

**[SHERIF RAMADANI]**

We are from Ferizaj. We stayed for three days in Bllace. From there we went to Albania. There was no room for us there, so they sent us back to a mosque in Struga. Then we lived in private houses in villages.

**[NARRATOR]**

After many years of displacement, they still want to return to Kosovo.

**[SHERIF RAMADANI]**

We have been asking to return for six, seven years. I would like to return to Kosovo as soon as possible. We are suffering greatly here. We are not receiving any assistance for four years now. We are moving from one

house to another. Landlords are expelling us. On July 10 is the last deadline for us to leave Skopje. If we don't leave on our own, they could even take us to the border by force. I have two children, a wife, my mother, sister and brother. There are seven of us living in this house. The house is old but what can we do. I would like for our house in Kosovo to be built as soon as possible, so that I can go back to my house.

**[NARRATOR]**

The Kosovo legal framework enshrines the right to a voluntary, dignified and sustainable return for all displaced persons. Since the year 2000, over 10,000 people from the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities have returned to Kosovo. But problems still remain. Some neighborhoods in Kosovo are reluctant to accept the returnees. They fear that the influx of people will make the current economic situation get worse. For example, the Ramadani family bought land in Kosovo, in the village of Plemetina. And the municipality and the UN Refugee Agency, or UNHCR, said they were eligible to get their house built, through a project funded by the European Union. But their potential neighbors signed a petition to oppose their return. According to Sherif's mother, it was difficult to buy the land – but even tougher to find out that her family was not welcome.

**[SHERIF RAMADANI'S MOTHER]**

The money that we saved for Plemetina was collected by my sons and my daughter, who worked on their sewing machine until 5 every morning. We saved money and bought the land. But now our problem is that they don't want to accept us.

**[NARRATOR]**

Despite ongoing problems, the families are not giving up hope. And neither are their local and international partners. For its part, UNHCR – with financial support from the European Office in Kosovo – is working to find durable solutions for up to 60 displaced families from the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities who want to return home and reintegrate into Kosovo life. Through this project, 18 families with 92 members have already returned -- and another 42 families are expected to return over the next year and a half. Mehmet Stollaku and his family are a positive example of how cooperation between displaced persons, receiving communities and international donors, can lead to a better future. The family suffered when it had to escape from violence and look for refuge. But they are finally back home.

**[MEHMET STOLLAKU]**

We fled Kosovo because we feared the war. We lived in Pristina before the war, in Vranjevc. When war broke out, we feared for our lives. We were afraid and that is why we left. We reached Hani i Elezit, but we were sent back from there. Afterwards, we went to the school in Fushë Kosovë, where refugees were staying. We lived in the school for six months. That is when our family split. I, my brother and my sister-in-law fled to Skopje, my mother, sister and father stayed here. We even had to beg on the street in order to collect some money and bring our family there. A child cannot live without his mother. We went through some very difficult times. It has been six months since we returned from the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. No matter where you go, there's no place like home. We are very grateful to UNHCR and to the municipality here. I am happy because I have a roof over my head here in Kosovo. I don't care about anything else. No one comes to tell me get out. Even without electricity and food, we are in our own house. This is what made me come back.

**[NARRATOR]**

It is not enough to simply return home. Reintegration back into society is a significant challenge. Mehmet Stollaku came back home with his wife, sister, mother and two children, last December. He and his family are very happy with their new house. But they know the future will not be easy.

**[MEHMET STOLLAKU]**

We are faced with difficult conditions. I still collect bottles and sell them. There is no other work.

**[NARRATOR]**

Displaced persons and returnees are showing their resilience every day. And it is clear that they won't give up their right to return, their right to a better life. Because, as Mehmet said, 'There is no place like home'.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees is deeply engaged with the voluntary return process. And his Chief of Mission in Kosovo, Jo Hegenauer, is leading UN efforts on the ground.

**[JO HEGENAUER, UNHCR]**

UNHCR has always worked to help people voluntarily return to Kosovo. If people want to come home we make sure that they can cross borders, have documents, receive assistance and get the same basic rights and services as every other person in Kosovo. The people of Kosovo know what it is like to be afraid. They know what is like to run for your life and to seek asylum in another country. Unfortunately hundreds of families in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Montenegro are unable to return. They want to come back to the municipalities where they were born. The obstacles to the return are simply the municipalities are not allocating land to build homes. Another fact that surprises the United Nations is that communities are unwilling to let these people come back to their homes. Everyone has the right to come home. These people have that right.

**[NARRATOR]**

After 15 years, it is time for the displacement to end. Because the future of Kosovo relies on it being a truly inclusive society, where everybody can enjoy their rights, including the right to come back home.