

A PUBLICATION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITY HUMANITARIAN OFFICE (ECHO)

## Bosnia-Herzegovina

# For a more humane approach to returnees

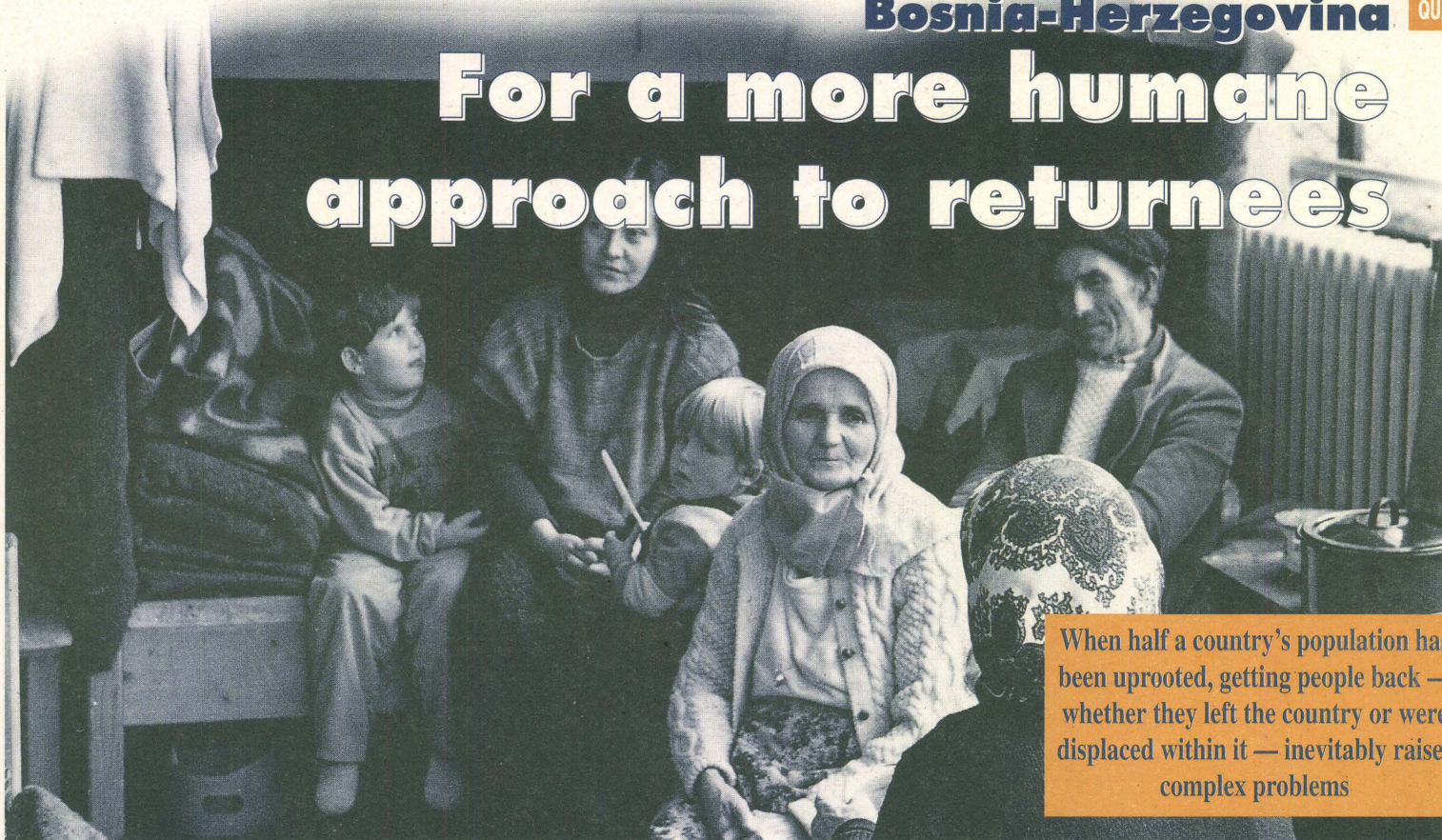


Photo UNHCR

When half a country's population has been uprooted, getting people back — whether they left the country or were displaced within it — inevitably raises complex problems

August 1, 1997. Some 500 Bosnian Muslims (Bosniaks) who tried to return to their newly-repaired homes near Jajce (Croat majority), were confronted by mobs of Bosnian Croats who torched their houses and forced them out. Suddenly, the front pages had to make space for the kind of images that were commonplace at the start of the war. Some people even started referring to "ethnic re-cleansing" — this was the second time these families had been chased from their villages, and had their houses set on fire. In Vogosca, a suburb of Sarajevo (Bosnian Muslim majority), about a hundred Bosnian Muslim women and children expelled from Srebrenica stoned a public building where families of displaced Bosnian Serbs were gathered to visit their former homes.

Of the 2.1 million Bosnians displaced at the end of the war, only 300,000 have returned to their homes. Less than 30,000 have gone back to territory now controlled by a different ethnic group. Only 700 Bosnian Muslims and Croats have returned to the Republika Srpska, mostly to the 4 km-wide "zone of separation", a demilitarised strip along the boundary between Bosnia's two entities, the Federation of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Republika Srpska.

However, the return of refugees and displaced people to their original homes is a prerequisite for lasting peace in former Yugoslavia. That is why ECHO is financing projects in Bosnia and Herzegovina to this end. Such projects complement the large-scale reconstruction work being carried out with European Union funding, which give priority to towns and major infrastructure. So ECHO is taking a more local approach and is

focussing on villages that sustained heavy damage. ECHO is also concentrating on supplying aid to those identified as being most vulnerable.

### Bringing villages back to life

During the war, many villages were very badly damaged. Their inhabitants fled to the towns to seek refuge. There, they occupied houses and flats left empty by those who had escaped from rural areas. But how can refugees be persuaded to return now if their homes are occupied? ECHO is trying to find solutions, encouraging villagers to return home to ease crowding in urban areas. There are no magic wands: only those well-integrated in a community can understand the

### Tribute to Diana

"The battle against landmines will go on in her name"

"In my role as Commissioner for humanitarian aid, I would like to pay tribute to the tireless social and humanitarian work of Princess Diana. We were united in particular in the battle against anti-personnel landmines. We were due to have met in October in London to relaunch the international campaign for the total elimination of these weapons. We will continue the battle in her name."

Emma Bonino

The death of Diana, Princess of Wales came on the eve of a Conference in Oslo in which some 100 countries worked to draft a text for a treaty banning the use, export, production and stockpiling of landmines which kill or maim 25,000 people a year. The draft will be the basis for a conference to finalise a treaty in Ottawa this December.

nature of the problems. Repairing or rebuilding houses is not enough, as an incident in Jajce proved. That is where Croats saw off Bosnian Muslims trying to return home. To avoid such tragic flare-ups, ECHO's experts examine projects case-by-case. To resettle a community, ECHO believes the needs of all parties have to be taken into account. Returnees and host communities have to be in agreement. To ease tensions, there should be measures to improve life for host



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communities too. This can mean building a school or a health-care centre, or repairing water supply and electricity systems. In the process of carrying out their work, ECHO-funded NGOs have fostered personal contact with families, checked title deeds, negotiated with town councils, and tried to identify the needs of all parties, monitoring projects and stepping in when problems arise.

## Defusing the tension

With 60 to 80 percent unemployment and virtually no social security, life is still very precarious for many people in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Flows of people returning push what systems there are to their limits. Refugee families are returning to communities that strain to support their reintegration, and are sometimes even hostile to their return. *"They left the country and had an easy time during the war, while we stayed behind. Now they are returning to steal our jobs and claim back their houses. And to top it all, they are being paid to come back"* — this a typical reaction in host communities. The rising tension between communities is aggravated by the lack of practical information on property rights, social security rights, municipal registration, and so on. In addition to supporting the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees transit centre, ECHO has set up a programme to provide citizens' advice to people who have returned to the country, to help them face up to their new situation: establishing contact with the local authorities and organisations, enrolling children in schools, and

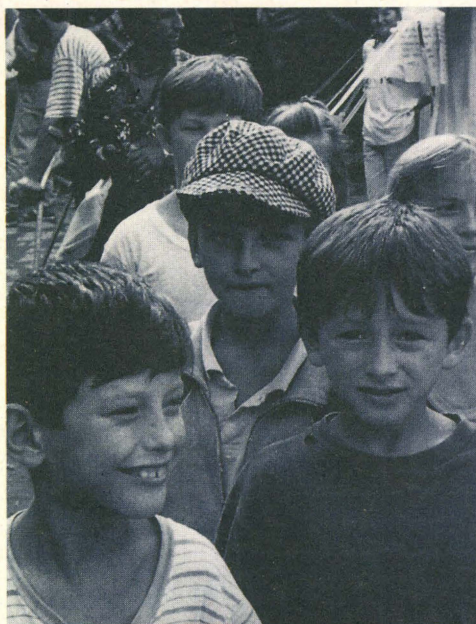


Photo ICRC

**People returning are ill-informed about their rights. CARE is helping them find out what their entitlements are**

advising them on their rights. This way of working also helps to defuse tensions between residents and returnees, the NGOs say. CARE, for instance, is opening seven reception centres that will give assistance to refugees. These centres will be particularly important in supporting the repatriation of people from minorities, as they will offer a safe space for returnees to discuss and solve practical problems.

## Encouraging minorities to return

Ethnic minorities in Bosnia-Herzegovina are very reluctant to go back home. With the Danish Refugee Council, ECHO succeeded in resettling its first Bosnian Muslim families in Stolac (Southern Bosnia, Croat majority) at the end of June. Over 8,000 Bosnian Muslims (known as Bosniaks) had to leave the area in 1993, when war broke out between their community and the Croats. To encourage the process of reintegration, ECHO favours reciprocity — two-way flows of people returning home. That is why there are efforts underway today to encourage Croats now displaced in Stolac to go back to Kakanj (Central Bosnia), where the majority is Bosnian Muslim. ECHOnews asked High Representative Carlos Westendorp what he thought of this approach.

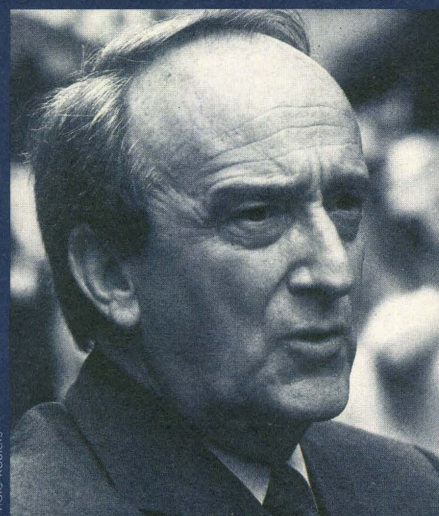


Photo Reuters

**High Representative Carlos Westendorp: "We have to act at both national and local levels"**

*"To succeed in reintegrating minorities, we have to take the specifics of each region, each village into account. But we must not lose sight of the need to undertake action simultaneously at the local level and at higher levels too. Many of the problems raised at local level are symptomatic of problems identified at a higher level, and need a high-level solution. What is more, decisions taken*

*at higher levels are not implemented on the ground without pressure applied by international organisations and non-governmental organisations. That is where action on the part of ECHO and its non-governmental partners comes in. It is important to set precedents to encourage people to return. This means that residents of host communities should also receive aid, for instance, displaced Croats from Kakanj (Central Bosnia) who are today living in Stolac. Reinforcing a process in which all are seen to benefit can only boost its success."*

Note. Bosnia-Herzegovina is made up of two entities: the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Croat-Muslim) and the Republika Srpska. The population of Bosnia and Herzegovina is made up of three communities: Bosnian Muslims (known as Bosniaks), Bosnian Croats and Bosnian Serbs. Carlos Westendorp was appointed High Representative by the Peace Implementation Council, endorsed by the UN Security Council in July 1997.

In Doboj, Republika Srpska, displaced people make up 60 percent of the population. Many of them are elderly, and live alone. With the support of ECHO, CARE International has opened a psycho-social care centre. *"If they need to go to hospital, then we take them. If they depend on medication, we collect their prescriptions,"* explains Dunja Bakic, who is running the project. Dunja encourages re-settled refugees to become more involved with visiting others in a similar situation. *"If you have really experienced hardship, you know what is needed in these situations."*

## Safety net

A skinny, Croat woman aged 55 welcomed a CARE International social worker and an ECHO representative to her 'home' in Doboj. She is living in a shed in the garden of the elegant house that used to be her residence, now home to a family of Serbs. She showed us the deeds that prove her ownership. She survives on ECHO food parcels, distributed by Action Contre la Faim.



**Living on the doorstep of her own house means fighting waves of depression every day**

Her eyes dissolved in tears. Living on the doorstep of her own house means fighting waves of depression every day. CARE International can do nothing to return the house to her, but they make sure there is someone to listen, someone to visit and someone to make sure she can cope.

## Reducing dependency

The lack of social security in Bosnia-Herzegovina means that many people are very dependent on humanitarian aid. That goes for elderly people, the disabled, displaced people still living in collective



**ECHO means a safety net for vulnerable people. Medical aid is available in Visoko (Zenica-Doboj Canton)**



# ECHO's global reach

## CENTRAL EUROPE

### Worst flooding in centuries

The worst natural disaster in the history of Central Europe struck this summer. Torrential rains provoked flooding on a scale for which no-one was prepared. Poland and the Czech Republic were the hardest hit, with more than a hundred deaths, and hundreds of thousands of people evacuated. As the flood waters receded, the full extent of the disaster became apparent: houses destroyed, roads blocked, electricity cut off, farmland and factories ruined. Because of the extent of

the damage to buildings, the start of the new school year was postponed in the worst-affected regions. Some 37,000 people in Poland, and 16,000 people in the Czech Republic were still living in temporary shelters as we went to press. ECHO responded to an International Federation of the Red Cross appeal with ECU 2 million in aid, ECU 500,000 of which went to Caritas. This was used to supply basic essentials for victims and to organise collective accommodation for families evacuated. While awaiting the start of more extensive reconstruction projects under the Commission's Phare programme, ECHO will fund urgent repairs to houses, hospitals and schools, to be undertaken before the winter sets in.

Emma Bonino, Commissioner for Humanitarian Assistance, visited Poland and the Czech Republic at the end of July to assess the situation and to assure the two countries that they could count on the European Union for support.



Czech Republic: as the flood waters receded, the extent of the damage became apparent

Photo ECHO

## CAMBODIA

### Full-scale alert

The violent fighting which broke out in Cambodia in early July is over in the capital, Phnom Penh. But FUNCINPEC troops loyal to Prince Ranariddh, ousted first prime minister, and CPP troops loyal to Hun Sen, second prime minister, were still fighting in the north-west of the country in September. More than 20,000 people fled the country and headed for Thailand. In July, ECHO rushed ECU 535,000 to Medecins Sans Frontieres-France to provide medical and surgical supplies such as antibiotics, anti-tetanus serum, and surgical kits for hospitals coping with the emergency. The aid also included basic essentials for those displaced by the fighting.

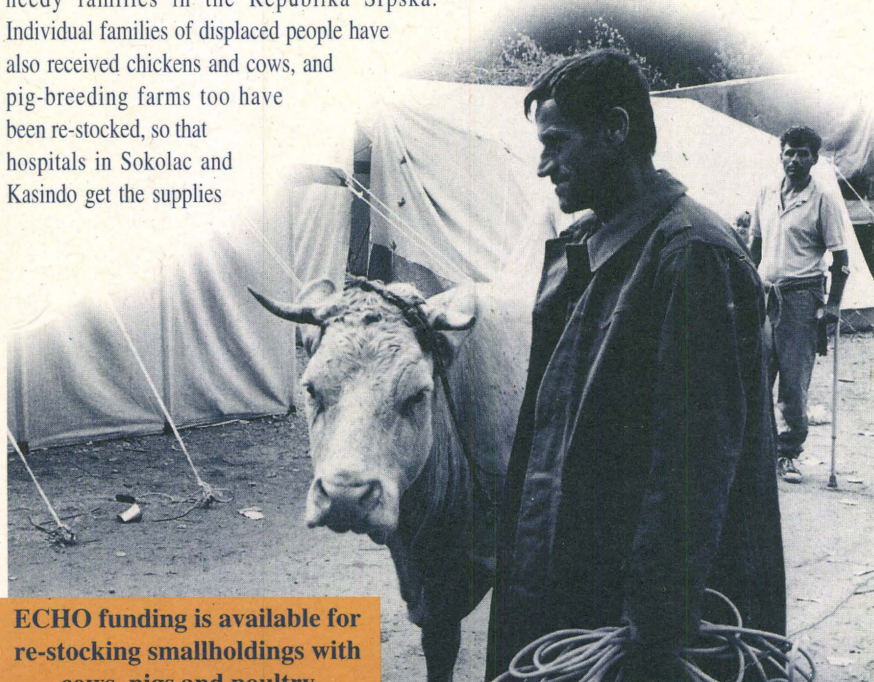
### Ongoing landmines campaign

In August, a further ECU 1,565,000 were cleared to reinforce the operations of NGOs already active in the field, responding to growing demands because of the crisis. This will provide medical aid to people uprooted by the fighting and enable essential repairs to be carried out to the bombed hospital of Kossamak in Phnom Penh, where the war wounded were going for. It also covers Handicap International's ongoing action to fit anti-personnel mine victims with artificial limbs, and to restructure the very precarious health system in the northern provinces. ECHO is monitoring the situation, and may step in with further support as needed.

## ECHO in Bosnia-Herzegovina (continued)

centres, widows and others. ECHO funding provides a safety net, but is also behind activities to make people less dependent on handouts. For example, ECHO funding has re-stocked poultry farms with chickens, providing eggs as a supplement to food parcels for needy families in the Republika Srpska. Individual families of displaced people have also received chickens and cows, and pig-breeding farms too have been re-stocked, so that hospitals in Sokolac and Kasindo get the supplies

they need. ECHO has also supported the start-up of a tile factory, creating jobs and stimulating local production in the building industry.



ECHO funding is available for re-stocking smallholdings with cows, pigs and poultry

Photo ICRC

## Strict monitoring of operations

At the end of April 1997, ECHO approved aid worth ECU 98 million for the former Yugoslavia. Over four-fifths of that is for Bosnia-Herzegovina. ECHO's operations in that country are run from a central office in Sarajevo with branch offices in Banja Luka, Bihać, Mostar and Tuzla. This structure is essential to identify, monitor and assess operations in an extremely sensitive context. Experts need good information to identify those at risk, as well as for planning emergency rehabilitation work and assistance to returnees. The latter two areas are becoming increasingly important in the international community's quest for lasting peace to Bosnia-Herzegovina.

The latest funding brings ECHO's contribution to a grand total of ECU 1,465 million since the start of the conflict in former Yugoslavia.

Bosnia-Herzegovina

**'We soon understood there was another role we could play'**

— Nino Sergi

*InterSOS is an Italian NGO and an ECHO partner. InterSOS worked in Bosnia-Herzegovina during the war, and since the Dayton Accords, has continued to provide humanitarian aid there. It has adapted and diversified its role to respond to new needs since the war. These include repairing the infrastructure and rebuilding homes, as well as helping to set up small businesses. Nino Sergi, InterSOS' Secretary General, told ECHOnews how thinking had changed.*

**Are humanitarian organisations still needed in Bosnia-Herzegovina?**

That is exactly what we asked ourselves after the Dayton Agreement. It is clear that a great many people are still entirely dependent on humanitarian aid — elderly people, displaced people, orphans, the disabled and so on. But we soon understood that there was another role we could play too. NGOs are still the most appropriate means of tackling the huge problem of displaced people. This must be done on a case by case, district by district, village by village basis. When half a country's population has been uprooted, getting people back — whether they left the country or were displaced within it — inevitably raises extremely complex problems. To understand the problems people face, aid workers need to integrate with the community and play a full part in its life. This kind of approach is difficult at the level of macro, global reconstruction programmes. Because NGOs are in direct contact with people, they are best placed to carry out this type of work. That is why we have decided to stay in Bosnia, and to help people return to their homes.

**In practical terms, how do you go about this?**

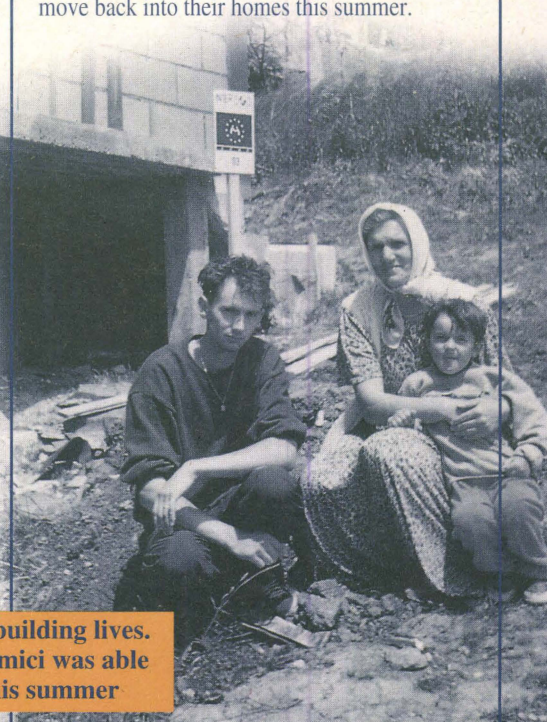
Our projects are focused on the villages near what was the front line. The damage there is very serious, and the

inhabitants moved away to the nearest towns, where they squatted apartments left empty by refugees who left the country. We want to create the conditions to get villagers back to their homes, freeing up the apartments they are occupying. Before starting our action, we try to reach a consensus and to get all parties committed. We hold discussions with the community which will host these villagers, in order to defuse any tensions and to take into account their needs also.

This takes an enormous amount of time, but today it is the only way to have any hope of succeeding with projects intended to bring together families from communities torn apart by the war. The idea is to encourage these communities to organise themselves, so that they link up with the NGO for the duration of the project. We are particularly pleased with the way in which our ECHO-funded project in Kalesija, near Tuzla, is working out (see "Empowering local communities").

Interview by Isabelle Brusselmans

**Repairing houses, rebuilding lives. This family from Memici was able to go back early this summer**



**Empowering local communities**

Tuzla, a multi-ethnic city in northern Bosnia, is overcrowded with villagers whose homes were destroyed. InterSOS has launched an innovative project to encourage Bosnian Muslim families to return to the villages of Memici and Kalesija Selo, 25 kilometres from Tuzla, close to the former front line. The idea was simple: empower communities by letting them manage the project themselves. InterSOS supplied the material, the technical assistance and skilled labour to give them the means to rebuild their houses themselves. ECHO agreed to support this ambitious initiative. "Families organised themselves. Frequent meetings made it possible to discuss, plan and organise the work," explained Renato Moras, Project Head at InterSOS. Local carpenters, masons, electricians and plumbers were recruited to help the families. By working together, people not only rebuilt their houses, they also rebuilt their lives. They learnt skills, while developing a sense of community. Over 80 families were thus able to move back into their homes this summer.

**ECHO TV AND RADIO AWARDS 1997**

ECHO's campaign to promote informed and responsible reporting of humanitarian crises enters its second year, boosted by the ECHO TV and Radio Awards scheme. This is an annual event to encourage productions that raise awareness about humanitarian situations in all their complexity. This year's event is being organised jointly by ECHO, the Luxembourg Presidency of the EU, and the Luxembourg Red Cross. The ceremony for the 1997 ECHO TV and Radio Awards will take place on December 9 at the Theatre des Capucins, Luxembourg, under the patronage of Grand Duchess Charlotte, President of the Luxembourg Red Cross. The event will be the high point of the ECHO information campaign during the Luxembourg Presidency. Jean-Claude Juncker, Prime Minister of Luxembourg and leading members of his government will attend. Jacques Santer, President of the European Commission, will also be present. RTL TV will be screening the award ceremony live.

In 1996, the inaugural year of the awards scheme, there were over 220 entries. Judges for this year's awards include Irene Bignardi, Juan Luis Cebrian, Michel Rocard, Gaston Thorn and Emma Bonino.

**ARTISTS FOR HUMANITARIAN AID**

Leading artists from the 15 European Union Member States have been asked to donate a painting, the theme of which should be humanitarianism, solidarity or caring. The paintings will be exhibited on October 12-16 and auctioned by Christie's on October 16 at the Tropical Institute, Amsterdam in the presence of Commissioner Emma Bonino and Princess Margriet, vice-president of the Netherlands Red Cross. All proceeds will go towards projects working on family tracing projects in the Great Lakes region. To date, almost 60 top European artists have contributed works of art to the scheme. This project was launched at ECHO's exhibition in The Hague in April.