

A CHRONOLOGY prepared by the KMEG team

Beginning with key quotes, this provides a background summary of the wars, their consequences for the IDPs in North Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, and the role of the United Nations (UN) and other agencies.

"Some of the children in the UN camps will die. Those that don't, will have mental and health problems for the rest of their lives" (interview with a laboratory doctor who analyzed the lab test results from the camp, July 2005).

"People who lived on these toxic wastelands were sacrificed for human studies - that's what the scientists and researchers did in the past. But now the international humanitarian agencies should know better than to build camps on toxic waste." (Dr Rohko Kim, world expert on toxic poisoning, special mission to Kosovo, 2005).

"You will recall that during your time in office on behalf of the UN and the international community, a block of IDPs of Roma families were placed by UNHCR on the tailing stands of a lead mine. I recall visiting them myself when I also had the honour of meeting with you. You stated then that these families would be removed immediately" (MEP Baroness Emma Nicholson's letter to Bernard Kouchner, French Foreign Minister, November 2008)

"I think the danger is so great that it threatens to destroy one full generation of Romani children. UNHCR made a catastrophic mistake by building these camps. Nobody cared about the danger of this location. This is very tragic for everybody but especially for the Roma inhabitants (Ilija Elezović, former staff member, UNMIK, Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, 2005).

CHRONOLOGY OF GROSS NEGLECT AND BUREAUCRATIC INERTIA IN NORTH MITROVICË/MITROVICA CAMPS – A DECADE OF DE-HUMANIZATION AND IMMORAL TREATMENT OF ROMANI, ASHKALI, AND BALKAN-EGYPTIAN IDPs BY THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY AND AUTHORITIES IN KOSOVO (1999-2009)

1999: June 16

After NATO troops arrived in Kosovo, black uniformed KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army) soldiers begin visiting homes in the Romani (Gypsy) settlement (*mahalla*) of Fabrička in south Mitrovicë/Mitrovica. This is the largest Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian (RAE) community in Kosovo, with about 1,000 families comprising about 8,000 people. The RAE families are told that Kosovo is only for Albanians and the RAE must leave if they want to save their families. Over the next three months, many RAE families lock up their homes and move across the Ibar River into north Mitrovicë/Mitrovica. But accommodation is unavailable as thousands of Serbs also flee from Albanian nationalists. Most Mitrovicë/Mitrovica RAE leave for refugee camps in either Montenegro or Serbia. Later, several thousands leave via clandestine routes to join relatives in Germany and other countries in western and northern Europe. Also in June, about 50 families from Fabrička mahalla flee to the north Kosovan town of Leposaviq/Leposavić where the Yugoslav army gives them an army warehouse to take shelter in. According to one Romani activist at Leposaviq/Leposavić, when they first arrived in 1999, there was only one huge room with no partitions for privacy or hygiene facilities. The Roma hang blankets to partition off living space for each family.

1999: August

Paul Polansky, an adviser to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on Romani issues, visits the Fabrička neighbourhood to assess the

situation. He finds Albanians looting many of the abandoned homes. He asks French NATO troops in the area to intervene. Their Commanding Officer (CO) replies that they are not a police force, and that their mandate is only to protect Albanians from the local Serbs. The CO advises Polansky to find the local police to sort out the looting. There are no local police. The Serbs used to be the local police force and they too have fled.

1999: September 3

Polansky returns to Fabrička to find the community now empty of all Romani, Ashkali and Egyptian families. Albanians are dismantling most of the RAE homes, taking doors, windows, roof tiles and beams. Polansky again protests to French KFOR (Kosovo Force) soldiers and is told he will be detained if he continues bothering KFOR soldiers about a local police matter.

Polansky and his Romani interpreter Mr. Gashnaji cross the Ibar River and find about 800 Fabrička RAE squatting in a Serbian school house in Zvečan/Zvečan. *They are the last of the south Mitrovicë/Mitrovica RAE from Fabrička, too poor to follow their neighbours to Montenegro and Serbia. Most have not washed or eaten for days, some for weeks.* Polansky contacts **Oxford** Committee for **Famine** Relief (OXFAM) who bring urgently needed water and hygiene supplies for the families. He also contacts The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) who supply food parcels.

1999: September Baroness Nicholson meets Bernard Kouchner, Special Representative of the UN Secretary General (SRSG) at camps when he stated the families would be moved immediately.

1999: End of September

Local Serb authorities demand that UNHCR evacuate the Fabrička IDPs from the schoolhouse since it is needed for the new school year. UNHCR signs a contract with the local Serbian authorities of Zhitkovc/Žitkovac to rent a plot of land for 45 days next to an abandoned lead mining site where the IDPs can be housed in tents until UNHCR can find a permanent solution for these 800 vulnerable inhabitants. *Polansky accompanies the IDPs to the hurriedly erected tent city but protests to UNHCR officials that the tents have been put on toxic wasteland, next to slag heaps from the local lead mines.*

David Riley, head of UNHCR in Kosovo, assures Polansky that this is a temporary solution for only 45 days, and that if the "Fabrička Gypsies" cannot be returned to their homes by that time, then they will be taken abroad for resettlement.¹ A few days later Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) Dr. Bernard Kouchner (founder of *Medecins San Frontieres*, and currently the Foreign Minister of France) visits the site with British MEP Baroness Emma Nicholson who also protests the placement of the camp on toxic wasteland. **Dr. Kouchner personally assures Baroness Nicholson that the camp will be closed within 45 days and the inhabitants resettled elsewhere (see correspondence between Nicholson and Kouchner from 2008 in KMEG dossier).**

¹David Riley died on Jan. 19, 2000, at the age of 50 in Prishtinë/Priština, Kosovo, in his sleep. See <http://www.unmikonline.org/pub/news/nl24.html> for more details.

1999: November

With the onset of cold winter weather, the IDP leaders protest that their community cannot survive the winter in the makeshift tents. UNHCR claims they have no other solution. Mysteriously, the tents burn down and UNHCR has to house the IDPs in an apartment building.

1999: December

There are not enough apartments in Zhitkovc/Žitkovac to accommodate all the IDPs, so UNHCR contracts with ACT (Action by Churches Working Together) to build a camp in north Mitrovicë/Mitrovica called Česmin Lug/Çesmin Llug. These barracks are built next to the railroad tracks that border the tailing stands of the Trepča lead mines. These barracks are built with old lead-painted boards. Another 300 of the 800 IDPs are taken to the old warehouse in the town of Leposaviq/Leposavić. Polansky returns to the United States but continues to protest to David Riley, then Head of UNHCR, about the Zhitkovc/Žitkovac and Česmin Lug/Çesmin Llug camps being placed on highly toxic wasteland.

Lead contamination and its high concentration in the blood of the local population of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica were already known from previous epidemiologic and environmental studies arranged by the United Nations in 1999 **BEFORE** the installation of the three camps (Česmin Lug/Çesmin Llug, Kablar/Kablare, Zhitkovc/Žitkovac), however the International Community fails to act on this knowledge.

The RAE leaders fear their children are getting sick living on the toxic wasteland and call for a meeting with UNMIK, UNHCR, OSCE, KFOR and the Albanian leaders of south Mitrovicë/Mitrovica. Although most of their homes have no roofs, doors or windows, the RAE plead to be allowed to return to their homes. The Albanian leaders of south Mitrovicë/Mitrovica veto the proposal. They say they want no more Gypsies in their communities. The Albanians say they cannot guarantee the lives of the Gypsies if they return to their old neighbourhood.

2000: January

Half the Zhitkovc/Žitkovac RAE IDPs are moved to the hurriedly built, makeshift barracks at Česmin Lug/Çesmin Llug by UNHCR. The inhabitants protest, saying they have only a few stoves and very little firewood to keep their children warm during the harsh winter.

David Riley, age 50, dies on the night of 19th of January. Polansky continues to protest to the acting head of UNHCR in Prishtina - Dennis McNamara (an expert on IDPs within the UN system) but he refuses to answer any emails from Polansky.

2000: Spring

Polansky returns to Kosovo to find the IDPs in Zhitkovc/Žitkovac back in tents on the toxic waste. The Česmin Lug/Çesmin Llug camp is also still being housed on the toxic wastelands. Polansky goes to UNHCR headquarters in Prishtinë/Priština to complain, but the head of UNHCR Dennis McNamara refuses to see him. No one else at UNHCR can answer his questions about the future of these Fabrička RAE. Polansky visits the old neighbourhood of Fabrička and finds all the homes, more than 1,000 (where 8,000 RAE used to live) completely destroyed. Not one house

has a roof, doors or windows. Many Albanians are now chopping out the bricks from the remaining walls.

2000: Summer/Fall

SRSO Dr. Bernard Kouchner orders his UN medical team to make an investigation of the lead pollution in the entire Mitrovicë/Mitrovica area. French army doctors have reported several cases of lead poisoning in their soldiers who are quartered in an old Serbian army base 100 meters from the IDP camp at Ćesmin Lug/Ćesmin Llug.

Dr. Andrei Andreyew, the UN health officer for Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, heads the investigation and reports directly to Dr. Kouchner. Random blood testing carried out in August and September 2000 by Dr. Andrei Andreyew, a Russian consultant to the United Nations, confirms dangerous levels of lead poisoning in the RAE camps of Zhitkovc/Žitkovac and Ćesmin Llug/Ćesmin Llug². The lead levels are so high in some of the children that the Belgium lab doing the analysis asks for the tests to be redone. The lab has never seen such high lead levels. The second tests confirm the first tests.

2000: November

Dr. Andreyew submits his written report to Dr. Kouchner, head of UNMIK and a report to the World Health Organization (WHO), ***recommending evacuation of the RAE camps and fencing off the land so that the public cannot accidentally enter.***

His investigation shows that the entire population of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica is suffering from unhealthy levels of lead poisoning. ***However, the highest levels (three to four times higher than the average in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica) were found in the children in the IDP camps of Ćesmin Llug/Ćesmin Llug and Zhitkovc/Žitkovac.*** He also recommends that UNMIK close the smelter at Zvečan/Zvečan because the prevailing winds bring the toxic dust from the smelter and the nearby slag heaps directly past Ćesmin Llug/Ćesmin Llug and the French base now called Osterode camp.

Dr. Kouchner closes the smelter but does not evacuate the Romani camps. Dr. Andreyew leaves Kosovo and no one at UNMIK follows up on his recommendations to solve the lead poisoning in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica.

However, all UN police, UNMIK staff and KFOR soldiers stationed in the Mitrovicë/Mitrovica area are required to take blood tests every month to check their lead levels. No more tests are made of the RAE in the camps until 2004.

Dr. Andreyew's report, which UNMIK refused to release to the public, was never acted upon, with one exception: several international UNMIK police officers were tested, since they jogged daily on a path by the slag heaps near the Ćesmin Llug/Ćesmin Llug camp. Their lead levels were so high that UNMIK immediately repatriated them since lead poisoning cannot be treated at the source of poisoning without causing dangerous complications.

² <http://www.errc.org/cikk.php?cikk=2460>

Thus, though in 2000, UNMIK and other UN agencies themselves report on the extent of environmental damage, the local population is not informed about the degree of the danger they are being exposed to, as well as the long-term health risks.

Later that year, a small Romani boy at *Çesmin Llug/Česmin Lug* is killed by a train. Action by Churches Together (ACT) built the barracks where he lives only two meters from the tracks. After his death, ACT place a few strands of barbed wire between the tracks and the barracks to keep the children from wandering onto the railroad tracks.

2001: January/Winter

Several international NGOs take clothes and food to the three Romani camps since these items are always in short supply. UNHCR provides the basic necessities and keeps promising the IDPs they won't have to spend another winter in the camps. Paul Polansky, representing German-based international NGO *Society for Threatened Peoples (Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker GfbV)*³, continues to lobby for the Romani IDPs to be moved from the toxic wastelands. He is assured by UNHCR field officers that plans are underway to resettle all the IDPs in the three camps abroad since UNMIK recognizes that it is still too dangerous for the IDPs to return to their original settlement in Albanian controlled south Mitrovicë/Mitrovica.

Meanwhile, in the *Leposaviq/Leposavić* IDP camp, *Doctors without Borders (Medecins Sans Frontieres)* assists the Roma in building partitions on the premises so that each family has one small room with at least some privacy. The only access to water is from standpipes in the front of the buildings, so hygiene is very difficult to maintain and many become ill. Toilets were located outdoors, and initially with inadequate drainage with the result that there were many cases of sickness. *Doctors without Borders (Medecins Sans Frontieres)* helped the residents construct better toilet facilities. The lack of appropriate washing facilities for either adults or children causes many health problems. Poor quality food, lack of clean water and cramped living conditions contribute to a high incidence of disease among camp residents.

2002

UNHCR shelves all of its plans to resettle the camp Roma abroad. UNHCR contracts ACT (Action by Churches Working Together) office in *Prishtinë/Priština* to build barracks on the same toxic land in *Zhitkovc/Žitkovac*, replacing the tents. Since UNHCR has stated that the barracks are only temporary, they are built using second-hand materials, *especially old lead-painted boards*. As there are no water facilities on site, UNHCR makes an agreement with KFOR to truck in a minimum supply of water every few days. There is only one tap for all the families, who have to line up to get water.

Later that year, UNHCR stops all food and hygiene aid to all three camps, after a report from ACT saying the IDPs are selling part of their aid. The RAE IDPs admit they were selling some of their aid to buy shoes and schoolbooks for their children, but complain they never received enough aid to feed themselves and now they are

³ <http://www.gfbv.de/inhaltsDok.php?id=612>

starving. ACT and UNHCR representatives call the IDPs “parasites” and tell them they have to find their own food, hygiene products, and firewood. Several families leave the camps and end up in Serbia begging and sleeping under bridges. Those who remain in the camps find most of their food in the city’s garbage containers. Groups of IDP children from the Zhitkovc/Žitkovac camp wait every morning at the Zvečan/Zvečan municipal dump where the Mitrovicë/Mitrovica city garbage trucks drop their daily collections. Paul Polansky has a heart attack and returns to the USA for a double bypass operation.

2003/2004

The UN health officer for Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, Dr. Sergi Shevchenko, an optometrist from Canada, submits a proposal to build a 1.5-kilometer jogging track, outdoor basketball court, and soccer field on the toxic wastelands between the Çesmin Llug/Česmin Lug camp and the toxic slag heaps. UNMIK accepts his proposal and funds it. The sporting facilities are called the “Alley of Health” after a famous sports centre in Canada. Three-meter high signs in four languages are posted at several places along the jogging track encouraging people to “breathe in the air of health.” *Dr. Shevchenko does not warn the IDP children who flock to use the sporting facilities that exercise opens the lungs, thus allowing more toxic dust to be inhaled. French soldiers stationed at the nearby Osterode camp are told not to use the jogging track. UN police stationed in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica are also cautioned. Only the IDP children are encouraged to use the sports facilities.*

With no food aid being received from UNHCR/ACT, the IDPs in the camps of Zhitkovc/Žitkovac and Çesmin Llug/Česmin Lug are offered work smelting car batteries by a local Serb businessman, who has even been granted a license to smelt these car batteries by UNMIK administrators in Zvečan/Zveçani and openly delivers them to the camps every morning at 10AM. After smelting, the plastic battery casings are piled up at the entrance of each camp for this Serb businessman to take away once a week in a car and trailer. UNHCR and their implementing partner, ACT do not prohibit the smelting, just the opposite, saying, “It is time the RAE went to work instead of being parasites”.

Five weeks after his heart operation, Polansky returns to Kosovo to live permanently with the Roma in the enclaves south of Prishtinë/Priština. While now representing Society of Threatened Peoples (GfbV) fulltime in Kosovo, he also forms a UN-registered NGO with several local Roma called Kosovo Roma Refugee Foundation. Their objective is to help returning RAE refugees and IDPs, mainly with small business projects funded by the Swiss government. Polansky also begins several intensive English-language classes for RAE in the enclaves, Peja/Peć and Gjakovë/Djakovica. Using volunteer American teachers, the program teaches English to more than 200 RAE. With their English language skills, many now get jobs with KFOR and several international NGOs as interpreters.

2004: March/April

Four-year-old Djenita Mehmeti is sent home from the camp school in Zhitkovc/Žitkovac after her teacher sees she is losing her memory and complaining of pains in her legs. Many mothers in both camps complain to ACT staff that their children are always sick. The most common complaints are daily vomiting, memory loss, poor co-ordination, getting highly nervous and then falling into a coma for several minutes. The local hospital in north Mitrovicë/Mitrovica refers Djenita to a

Serbian hospital in Kragujevac. She is not sent to Belgrade because her doctor doesn't think she would survive the journey. *Djenita is treated for three months before being sent back to the UN camp at Zhitkovc/Žitkovac. **A few weeks later she falls into a coma and dies. Because many children in the camps have the same symptoms, WHO is asked to investigate.*** They ask Miljana Stojanović of the Institute of Public Health in north Mitrovicë/Mitrovica to perform blood tests on most of the children in the camps. WHO donates a new Lead Care Analyser for the testing. The tests are conducted in April 2004. *The results are staggering. All the children have life-threatening lead levels, most over 65 mg/dl, the highest the analyser can register.*

After the investigation prompted by the death of Djenita Mehmeti, and the compiling of the information from the blood lead level (BLL) results, WHO Pristinë/Priština sends a letter to UNMIK calling for an immediate evacuation of the UN camps. UNMIK refuses, claiming that they have no place to take 500 Gypsies. UNMIK pleads lack of resources to tackle the problem, and says they are too involved in preventing a new war between Albanians and Serbs in Kosovo to be bothered about the logistics of saving 500 Gypsy IDPs. UNMIK, however, does begin holding meetings twice a month with NGOs concerned about the lead poisoning. Key participants at these meetings are: WHO, UNHCR, ACT, NCA, ICRC, Swiss Red Cross, OSCE and KFOR.

2004: November

Finally, a broader segment of the international community (NGOs, etc.) become fully aware of the extent of this lead poisoning tragedy.

The Swiss Red Cross invites Paul Polansky to attend the second meeting organized by UNMIK. *Most of the discussion focuses on where the IDPs could be relocated. UNMIK proposes the old lead-smelting complex in south Mitrovicë/Mitrovica. UNHCR says they could bring in containers to house the families, but the containers are not winterised. **Polansky complains that this is just moving the families from one toxic site to another. Polansky proposes airlifting all the camp IDPs to Fort Dix, New Jersey (USA), where over 7,000 Kosovan Albanians were taken in 1999 until it was safe to return them to Kosovo. The KFOR representative supports the proposal, however UNHCR says it is not politically feasible.***⁴ At this second meeting of NGOs in November 2004 to discuss relocation of the IDPs to safer areas within Kosovo province, Ms. Gerry McWeeney of WHO (currently based at WHO-Belgrade) surprises some of the participants by calling for a risk-management committee to be set up, instead of WHO's earlier demands for immediate evacuation. At the same meeting, she also declares that Polansky and others cannot prove that Djenita died of lead poisoning, despite clear evidence to the contrary provided by her treatments, symptoms, and the blood lead levels of her two-year-old sister Nikolina.⁵

Other committees are proposed by the international community. Swiss Red Cross and Polansky are not invited back to any other meetings. No proposal for relocation

⁴As victims of war in Kosovo, having been forced to remain as IDPs for 10 years from 1999, given the severity of contamination of the lead toxic camps they live on, the NATO countries should offer them a medical evacuation.

⁵ See Paul Polansky (2005), *UN-leaded Blood*, Kosovo Roma Refugee Foundation, p. 14.

is ever put to the camp leaders, but several weeks later, UNHCR and ACT begin circulating rumours that the IDPs were offered alternative housing but refused it.⁶

*In December, two-year-old Nikolina Mehmeti falls into a coma with the same symptoms her sister had before her death. A UN medical team request permission from Dr. Sergi Shevchenko to transport Nikolina by ambulance to hospital in Belgrade. Dr. Shevchenko, a Canadian-Ukrainian doctor working for the UN's Health Division in Kosovo, refuses. Many women in the camps complain of difficult pregnancies and more than 50 have miscarriages. **ICRC sends a letter to UNMIK demanding immediate evacuation of the camps. UNMIK refuses.***

During the year, many Kosovan RAE refugees return from Serbia after UNHCR says it is safe to return. When they find their homes have not been rebuilt in south Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, and that the local Albanians are still antagonistic towards them, these refugees move into abandoned barracks next to Çesmin Llug/Česmin Lug, called Kablar/Kablare. The barracks are directly in front of the French base at Osterode camp. The barracks were abandoned by Serbian workers before the 1999 war because asbestos was discovered in the walls and roofs, and also because of high toxicity from the nearby slag heaps.

UNHCR does not prevent the other IDPs returning from Serbia inhabiting the barracks. In fact, Dr. Shevchenko immediately submits a proposal to UNMIK to build 300 more barracks on the site for other IDPs who may follow.

Polansky, funded by SFTP, sends his staff (two Romani women) into the camps twice a week to interview the Romani, Ashkali and Egyptian women about the health conditions of their children and to deliver much needed hygiene products. **Most of the women beg for contraceptive pills so they won't have any more children. All children in the camp are suffering from neurological disorders. A Czech psychiatrist, Hana Klimenova, working for WHO, tells Swiss Red Cross and Polansky that, "We have lost an entire generation of RAE children in the camps to mental retardation."** The lead levels are now so high in all the mothers that doctors consulted are of the opinion that every child conceived in the camps will be born with irreversible brain damage. To combat the IDPs' continuing fear of lead poisoning, UNHCR send one of their staff to all the families telling them they don't have lead poisoning but are suffering the effects of depleted uranium from the NATO bombs used during the war.

In 2004 and 2005, the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) begin compiling a prospective database of returnees to the South Mahalla and preparing more project proposals for the resettlement of Roma in the South Mahalla. However the majority of RAE are extremely resistant to these proposals (the situation has not changed and the few Roma who previously moved to the south want to return to the north).

⁶ In Nov 2004 UNMIK in Mitrovicë/Mitrovica began to say that the IDPs were offered an alternative place to move to but had refused. Polansky asked UNMIK at the time to tell him where the Roma had been offered alternative accommodation. UNMIK finally told him that the Roma had been offered an old building next to the old smelter on the south side of the river. It would be cleaned up for them. But it too was on a toxic site and of course on the south side. But ever since, UNMIK has declared that the Roma were offered a resettlement plan but refused. The Roma have never been offered a medical solution to save their children. They are still waiting for one.

2005

A staff member of WHO, upset by UNMIK's and WHO's apparent cover-up of the tragedy, asks Paul Polansky to let the world know what is happening. Polansky publishes an opinion piece in the *International Herald Tribune* about the plight in these UN camps⁷.

Though several other journalists pick up the story, UNMIK authorities still refuse to evacuate the camps. Many children experience spells of unconsciousness but receive no medical treatment. Because Dr. Shevchenko refuses to help Nikolina, on the grounds that she lives in the camp at Zhitkovc/Žitkovac, which is outside his area of jurisdiction (even though she attends a hospital in his jurisdiction), Polansky takes Nikolina and her mother to Belgrade for treatment.

Upon arrival, Nikolina falls into a coma. The hospital, *Mother & Child Institute*, ("Institut Majka i dete") in Belgrade, the only place in the Balkans that treats lead poisoning, are horrified by her blood test results that reveal life-threatening lead levels. Polansky pays the hospital to allow Nikolina's mother to stay with her. Nikolina is treated for three weeks.

During that time, Polansky persuades the Swiss Red Cross to rent accommodation in Priluzhë/Prilužja where the family has relatives, in order to avoid Nikolina having to return home to the source of poisoning that the hospital says is liable to kill her. Later, Polansky finds an American Jewish philanthropist to buy a piece of land for the family and persuades the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) to build a new home for the family.

A few weeks later, Polansky agrees to take 13 Romani, Ashkali and Egyptian children and their mothers to Belgrade for treatment. All have lead levels higher than the maximum the analyser can register. None of the children have birth certificates or passports. Polansky asks ICRC for international travel permits to take the children to Serbia. ICRC refuse, saying they are unable to become involved in what is a political issue. Nevertheless, means are found to get them all to enter Serbia.

Since the children have referral papers from the local Serbian hospital in north Mitrovicë/Mitrovica showing their life-threatening lead levels, **the Mother & Child Hospital ("Institut Majka i dete)** agrees to accept the children for chelation treatment. Treatment is free because the mothers have Serbian IDs, but Polansky has to pay for the mothers to stay in the hospital with their children. Polansky has funds thanks to a donation to help these children by a Jewish philanthropist in the USA.

The hospital tells Polansky that treatment will take three to four weeks, but after the treatment, **the children cannot be taken back to the source of poisoning, otherwise they will experience even more serious complications.** Polansky leaves the mothers with funds to buy food and telephone cards to keep in touch with him and their families in the camps.

⁷ <http://www.iht.com/articles/2005/04/25/opinion/edpolansky.php>

Two days later, Polansky receives a call from the hospital demanding he return and pick up the RAE IDPs. If he isn't there by noon, they will be thrown out into the street. Serbian families whose children are being treated in the hospital do not want Gypsies there. Polansky calls ICRC for help. They tell him to contact their office in Belgrade.

Polansky drives with his caravan to Belgrade. He calls the ICRC head of mission. The ICRC director tells Polansky that it is a holiday in Serbia so the head administrator won't be there to make out the bill (Serbian hospitals will not discharge patients unless the bill has been paid). Polansky goes to the hospital and finds several mothers and their children already in the street. The hospital matron is getting the others ready to leave. There is no bill to pay. The hospital just wants to get rid of the Gypsies.

A way is again found to get them back to Kosovo. Funded by the same Jewish philanthropist, Polansky produces a film (*Gypsy Blood*) and a book (*UN-Leaded Blood*) about the tragedy in the camps. *He also asks European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) to file a lawsuit in the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR), Strasbourg against UNMIK. ERRC14 sends a lawyer - Dianne Post - to Kosovo to investigate and later file a lawsuit (see legal chronology in KMEG dossier).*

The Human Rights Court in Strasbourg rejects the lawsuit saying that only a country, not an organization, can be sued. Dianne Post, an American lawyer, leaves the ERRC (who essentially turn their back on the Kosovo IDPs), and begins negotiations with UNMIK seeking compensation for the victims of lead poisoning. Initially, UNMIK accept responsibility and discuss various forms of compensation, but later withdraw and stonewall all further approaches.

By this time, 28 IDPs have died in the camps. All had high lead levels or members of their families had life-threatening lead levels. *Doctors consulted say that this indicates that lead poisoning contributed to their deaths by damaging their immune systems making them more vulnerable to infection.* UNMIK now begins to accuse the IDPs of poisoning themselves by smelting car batteries.

Society for Threatened Peoples (GfbV), a German NGO whom Polansky represents in Kosovo, brings Klaus Runow, one of Germany's leading experts on lead poisoning to Kosovo to take hair samples of the children in the camps. His samples are analyzed by a laboratory in Chicago, Doctor's Data, Inc⁸.

Runow's assessment of the hair samples can be found in KMEG's dossier.

Not only are some of the highest lead levels in medical history found in the children's results, but so is the presence of 36 other highly toxic elements that are not found in car batteries (but are found on the wasteland on which the UN camps were built).

Twice during 2005, WHO-Bonn (Germany) send a global expert on lead toxicity, Harvard Professor Dr. Rohko Kim to Kosovo to advise UNMIK on the lead poisoning. Dr. Kim finds many children in the camps with lead

⁸ http://www.doctorsdata.com/test_info.asp?id=2

levels never previously reported in the medical literature. He recommends evacuation but UNMIK say that it is logistically impossible. Despite the mounting evidence, the UN Secretary General's Special Representative, Søren Jessen Petersen, refuses to take remedial action. Dr. Kim is told not to speak to the press or give interviews about the lead poisoning, but the GfbV team is subsequently able to obtain helpful insight from Dr. Kim.

2006

Reporters from *Bild Zeitung*, Germany's largest circulation daily newspaper come to Kosovo to write about the tragedy. Polansky introduces them to a Romani family, Shaban Mustafa and his seven children : Kasandra (5), Denis (8), Zejnija (8), Suada (10) , Shkurta (12), Serdjan (14), Semrana (15). The children's mother, Rukija Mustafa, died July 13, 2005, after giving birth to a stillborn child. Two of the seven surviving children have the highest lead levels ever in recorded.

Polansky believes they will not live much longer and asks the reporters to help save them. *Bild Zeitung* and the "A Heart for Children" foundation⁹ (Ein Herz für Kinder, supported by the Society for Threatened Peoples (GfbV) agrees to take the family to Germany and donates money to get their birth certificates, passports and plane tickets. Despite the medical emergency, the German government office in Pristinë/Priština will only grant visas to two of the children. The German television channel ZDF - Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen, who are also interested in the story, call top German officials in Berlin and get visas for all eight members of the family, who fly to Germany with Polansky and his team.

For the next six months, they are treated by Klaus Runow, a German specialist in heavy metal toxicity, at a special clinic in Bad Emstal. Before treatment, all the children are given a body scan at a special clinic in Bad Wildungen. When seven-year-old Denis is in the body scan, the German doctors point out his liver to Polansky and tell him that Denis's liver resembles that of a 60-year-old alcoholic drinking a bottle of whiskey a day. The doctors say Denis is likely to die before the age of 20. Irreversible organ and brain damage is evident in all seven children.

Polansky himself and his staff are also treated for lead poisoning in Germany. Despite only spending a few hours/week in the camps, their lead levels are double the level liable to cause brain damage. Aljezeera TV film the body scans of the Mustafa children and later air a program about the camps and featuring the only family to be evacuated and receive medical treatment.

Finally admitting that the camps are located on highly toxic waste, UNMIK decides to bow to international pressure and take some steps to try to convince the public they are dealing with the lead pollution. After French KFOR abandon their base at Osterode camp, a few meters from the contaminated camps at Kablar/Kablare and Çesmin Llug/Çesmin Lug, UNMIK requests funding from the German government (500,000 Euros) to remodel Osterode to house all the RAE families from Zhitkovc/Žitkovac, Kablar/Kablare and Çesmin Lug/Çesmin Llug. UNMIK refuse to consider reports that the French military doctors have told all

⁹ <http://www.ein-herz-fuer-kinder.de/>

their soldiers not to father a child for nine months after leaving Osterode because of the soldier's high lead levels while serving there.

*Believing that the main source of the toxicity is the ground that the camp is built on (rather than atmospheric pollution, as first reported in 2000 in Dr. Andreyew's report), UNMIK cement over the land at Osterode camp. The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) based in Atlanta, Georgia, conduct their own assessment, and subsequently declare the camp "lead safe." However, KMEG notes that **the CDC at the same time called for the immediate closure of the Česmin Lug/Çesmin Llug camp, citing the very high levels of exposure to toxic pollutants.** Three years later, the Director of CDC, Bush-appointed Dr. Julie Gerberding, will be forced to resign after being accused of – amongst other things – manipulating medical tests to conform with political agendas.¹⁰*

Obviously aware that most of the lead poisoning in the camps comes from the windblown dust of the nearby toxic waste heaps, the **UN Secretary General's new Special Representative for UNMIK, Joachim Rucker, announces during his first press conference that Camp Osterode, has been refurbished and is now supposedly not "lead safe" but "lead safer."** He says that all the IDPs will be evacuated from the three camps, Zhitkovc/Žitkovac, Kablar/Kablare and Çesmin Llug/Česmin Lug to Osterode camp. (this follows Polansky's accusation that the US Government Office in Prishtinë/Priština (USOP) has offered hundreds of thousands of dollars to Kosovo Albanians for tuberculosis and AIDS but nothing at all for the lead poisoning of the RAE IDPs.

Nevertheless, the "United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) emphasizes - in 2006 - that Camp Osterode "is an interim solution, it is not a permanent solution. **The health situation of all of the residents, particularly the young children in the camps, is intolerable and really one of the worst health crises that we have in this part of Europe.**"¹¹

*This confirms what the IDPs believed all along- they don't believe that Osterode is any safer for their children especially after spokespersons for WHO and CDC publicly state that there is no safe level of lead for children. **The IDPs demand to be taken abroad and provided with medical treatment like the Mustafa family, and as a consequence, they refuse to move to the Osterode camp.*** Then, a mysterious fire breaks out at Kablar/Kablare destroying most of the barracks, and the IDPs are thus forced to move to Osterode. Over the next three months, all the families leave Zhitkovc/Žitkovac because they are promised free food and a better diet that will lower lead levels at Osterode. Only the IDPs in Çesmin Llug/Česmin Lug remain in their barracks. Although there is no public announcement, the US Government Office in Prishtinë/Priština (current Ambassador Ms. Tina Kaidanow) donates \$800,000 to fund food and medical treatment for the IDPs now living in Osterode.

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julie_Gerberding

For further information on CDC, view the current director's profile at: <http://www.cdc.gov/about/leadership/director.htm>

¹¹ United Nations Daily Highlights, 06-02-16 See quotes by the Principal Deputy Special Representative of the UN Secretary General in Kosovo, Larry Rossin and Marc Danzon, the Regional Director for Europe of the World Health Organisation <http://www.hri.org/news/world/undh/2006/06-02-16.undh.html>

WHO tells the US office that a better diet will lower lead levels. This type of treatment for lead poisoning is called the "Milwaukee Study." That study showed that lead levels can be lowered by as much as 20% by eating mainly fresh fruit and fresh vegetables - *but crucially, only after the affected persons are removed from the source of poisoning*. Random blood tests are taken of children at Osterode and Çesmin Llug/Çesmin Lug.

2007

In 2007, the CDC releases a new report¹² of lead poisoning at camps, citing a Mr. Barry Brooks as the person in charge of the testing. **The report's recommendations still do not call for an immediate medical evacuation, despite critical medical evidence to the contrary.** The IDPs in both camps claim that WHO refuses to show them the results of all the blood tests taken twice per year since 2005.

Norwegian Church Aid, the official administrators of the camps since 2005, complain when UNMIK stop all food aid, saying the funds from the US office have run out.

More blood tests are taken, but WHO refuse to make them public, telling the USOP (United States Office in Prishtinë/Priština, now the US embassy) that the blood tests show that the lead levels have dropped considerably in Osterode. Polansky obtains all the blood tests taken since 2005 from a WHO staff member determined to expose his agency's cover-up. The tests suggest that from 2006 to 2007, the lead levels in several children have actually increased, and that overall, the children in Osterode have higher lead levels than the children living in the old camp of Česmin Lug/Çesmin Llug⁷.

During the course of the year, Norwegian Church Aid and other donors build 24 apartments and several small homes in the old RAE settlement in south Mitrovicë/Mitrovica. Despite the overwhelming evidence of the effects of toxic poisoning up to this point at the camps, only 8 apartments are given to the vulnerable IDPs from the camps themselves, and the other apartments are given to Romani, Ashkali and Egyptian refugees coming back from Montenegro and Serbia. This allows UNHCR to demonstrate that its "minorities return policy" works. UNMIK promises that more apartments will be built.

However, the eight families that do move back to their old neighbourhood find life difficult and are afraid to live near Albanians who chased them out in 1999 and then looted and burned their homes. These eight families are forced to move back and forth between the camp and their new apartments. During their many years under UNHCR care, the Romani, Ashkali and Egyptian IDPs have never been treated for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which most, if not all are likely to have experienced.

The medical team that was supposed to monitor the "better diet" and chelation treatment with pills quit their jobs because they haven't been paid for months.

¹² <http://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/publications/Kosovoreport.pdf>

More than 60,000 Euros worth of chelation pills goes unused in the camps. Dr. Zoran Savic, in charge of the chelation treatment, stops the project, stating that the medical treatment is actually harming the children because they are being treated on the source of poisoning.

Because there is no heating in Osterode (families are not allowed to have wood burning stoves), many children in Osterode fall sick during the winter. Families who remained in Česmin Llug/Česmin Lug do not face this problem because they do have wood burning stoves. Most families are once again forced to find their food in the city's garbage containers.

In July 2007, chelation treatment for the camp children is stopped as a result of a strike by the medical staff who claim they haven't been paid for months, and by Dr. Savic's insistence that the treatment is doing more harm than good. A camp nurse paid by the camp management continues to work three hours/day at Osterode, looking after the general health of the general health of the IDPs, but not their lead poisoning treatment.

In September 2008, the IDPs in Leposaviq/Leposavić are forced to move by Serbs plans to build a sports facility on the site of the camp. Romani activists ask American lawyer Dianne Post to assist a letter-writing campaign in protest against this proposal.

Paul Polansky publishes several articles in the Prishtinë/Priština press and international publications about the lead poisoning tragedy. In order to drum up international support he undertakes a speaking tour in the United States. In Milwaukee, Wisconsin, where a Jewish philanthropist has funded Polansky's work and publications, Polansky meets the rabbi sister of Senator Feingold. Appalled by Polansky's speech and documentary film about the lead poisoning tragedy, she urges Polansky to contact her brother.

Over the next six months Polansky and several members of the Milwaukee Jewish community write letters to Senator Feingold begging him to put Polansky in contact with the American ambassador in Prishtinë/Priština who refuses to meet Polansky to discuss the tragedy. Senator Feingold does not answer any of the letters.

2008

An international advocacy group, known as the Kosovo Medical Emergency Group (KMEG), is formed to publicize the plight of the IDPs in the UN camps. ***The group – whose purpose is to push for an immediate medical evacuation - begins a press campaign and makes public the report from 2000, as well as all blood tests from 2004 to 2008 which WHO and UNMIK have refused to share with even the families in the camps.***

In the Fall of 2008, Polansky, representing KMEG and Society for Threatened Peoples (GfbV), gives presentations to Members of the European Parliament in Brussels, and Members of Parliament in London and a half-hour filmed presentation to the Irish Subcommittee on Foreign Affairs in Dublin.

USAID awards Mercy Corps, an American international NGO, a grant of US \$2,400,000 to resettle 50 camp families (out of 148) over the next two and a half years despite the fact that Mercy Corps has never worked with Roma in the camps

before. The tender submitted by Danish Refugee Council who have worked closely with the Roma, is passed over by USAID. Norwegian Church Aid, the only other NGO who have worked closely with the camp Roma, do not tender for the contract because they consider DRC to be the best qualified to work with the camp Roma.

KMEG protests that such programs will not save the camp's inhabitants. What is needed is an immediate medical solution. KMEG members demand from UNMIK to proceed with the immediate evacuation of the camps and provision for medical treatment - preferably abroad - since there are no facilities in Kosovo to house and treat the more than 500 IDPs. On 12 May, 2008, UNMIK officially turns over the three camps (Osterode camp, Česmin Lug/Çesmin Llug and Leposaviq/Leposavić) to the Kosovo government.

Despite direct appeals by KMEG members to the Kosovo Minister of Health, neither he, nor any member of his staff, are willing to pay a visit to the camps. However, WHO carries out more blood tests, which show that lead levels especially in the children remain high or are increasing. Several children still have lead levels in excess of the maximum level that the lead care analyser can measure.

In August 2008, the Ombudsperson for Kosovo opens an investigation into human rights abuses by UNMIK/UNHCR in the IDP camps in north Mitrovicë/Mitrovica following a formal complaint from Polansky. Hilmi Jashari, the Kosova Acting Ombudsperson at the time, promises a result by September but is silenced by the Kosovo government contact ceases with anyone who enquires about the investigation.

KMEG (Kosovo Medical Emergency Group) gets a UK-based NGO (Hope and Aid Direct) to take several truckloads of aid to the camps. A major UK-based law firm (Leigh Day & Co) works closely with American attorney Dianne Post in her legal action against the United Nations, seeking compensation for the RAE families who have suffered for nine years under UN negligence.

As the year ends, it is noted that 78 RAE had died in the camps since Nov 1999, their lives foreshortened by the severe damage caused to their health by toxic conditions in the camps.

MEP Baroness Emma Nicholson sends a letter to Dr. Bernard Kouchner in November 2008 reminding him of his pledge in the Fall of 1999 – when she herself had made a visit to the Kosovan IDP camps and he was the UN's Special Representative there – to close down the toxic camps and evacuate the families within 45 days. She expresses her dismay at the camps remaining open and urges Dr. Kouchner to take action.

Dr. Kouchner responds in December 2008 expressing personal concern and giving a number of unspecified, diplomatic assurances, among them the statement that he is contacting the EU and his French ambassador in Kosovo to look into the situation (see KMEG dossier for correspondence between Dr. Kouchner and Baroness Nicholson).

Katalin Barsony, a Hungarian Romani documentary filmmaker, who is the founder of *Mundi Romani* makes a film about the plight of the RAE in the North

Mitrovicë/Mitrovica camps. The film, *TRAPPED*¹³, an award-winning documentary, is shown at several film festivals throughout Europe, raising awareness amongst a broader community. Barsony visits Çesmin Llug/Česmin Lug and Osterode camp again in December 2008 to update and revise the film (with particular reference to the number of deaths in the camps which have now reached 80), and plans to launch it on YouTube.

In a filmed interview, the three camp leaders thank Polansky for his presentations in Brussels, London and Dublin, calling on him to continue to represent them in seeking evacuation and medical treatment for their people. They say this is their main priority, the only way to save their children. That their children are their greatest treasure.

2009 January

The Leposaviq/Leposavić camp has not been forced (see 2007 above) to move, but a new fence has been put up on the left side as you enter. Dianne Post, the US attorney on a return visit to the region, asks Romani leaders about the fence and is informed that it is part of a deal aimed at preventing the forcible eviction of all the occupants. The camp leaders agreed to the city erecting the fence and the sport facility was built elsewhere.

A local Albanian NGO based in Prishtinë/Priština called the Kosovo Agency for Advocacy and Development (KAAD) is contracted by the Kosovo government to replace Norwegian Church Aid in administering the RAE camps in north Mitrovicë/Mitrovica. The budget for running the camps, now under the aegis of the Kosovo Ministry of Communities and Returns, is cut by 74%. Funding covers the maintenance of minimum services at Osterode camp; no funds are provided for the running of Çesmin Llug/Česmin Lug. Distribution of food packages, previously provided by the international community to help reduce lead levels in the camps and combat malnutrition is discontinued.

The Kosovo Medical Emergency Group (KMEG) begins to prepare a dossier to send to heads of states and influential politicians to call their attention to this tragedy, **demanding immediate evacuation and medical intervention**. On Friday, Jan 29th, 2009, a press conference is held in Prishtinë/Priština where Dr. Dorit Nitzan, Head of the Lead Task Force at WHO Balkans Regional Office, calls for closure of the camps, and declares that the area on which the camps were built is unfit for human habitation due to high levels of toxicity.

Although WHO's press release notes the high level of toxicity, **it does not call for an immediate medical evacuation**, but instead calls for the urgent closure of camps as soon as possible, a call that has constantly fallen on deaf ears since 2000. The *International Herald Tribune* publishes a short piece on the WHO press conference, which calls for closing down the Çesmin Llug/Česmin Lug camp¹⁴.

Although KMEG welcomes WHO's initiative to secure a safer and healthier future for the IDPs, we would like to point out that some of the information in the press release might have been factually incorrect and misleading to the public. Firstly,

¹³ [http://www.mundiromani.com/about_us/?film\[film\]\[keyvalue\]=31-film](http://www.mundiromani.com/about_us/?film[film][keyvalue]=31-film)

¹⁴ <http://www.ihf.com/articles/ap/2009/01/31/europe/EU-Kosovo-Roma-Camps.php>

there are not just 100 families residing in the camps. There are a total of 148, and sometimes over 150 families when some choose to return from the South Mahalla.

WHO also did not explicitly point out how premature and avoidable deaths could result from severe damage to human immune systems through long-term exposure to lead. Once immune systems are weakened, people are more susceptible to death from otherwise curable illnesses.

KMEG has the names of the over 80 people who have died in the camps since 1999, well in excess of 10 apparently mentioned by a WHO official visiting the camps. Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) the camps' administrators from 2005 to 2008, admit that no death records were ever kept in any of the camps. The only list of those who died in the camps was kept by Polansky and his team, who attended most of the funerals and helped with funeral expenses. (No UN staff member or camp administrator ever attended the funeral of a child or adult who died in the camps).

BBC TV make a short program about the tragedy in the camps. UNHCR refuses to be interviewed for the program. Their spokesperson in Prishtinë/Priština states UNHCR have turned the camps over to the Kosovo government, hence the UN has no further interest in these camps or the inhabitants.

2009: February 2

Paul Polansky meets with Latif Masvarica, the leader of the Çesmin Llug/Česmin Lug camp. He informs Polansky that all families from the Çesmin Llug/Česmin Lug camp who moved to the south mahalla have moved back, as they are afraid to live and work there. The families who moved to the south mahalla from Osterode all want to come back for the same reasons, but the administrators at Osterode won't give them their barracks back.

Polansky begins filming with an Australian TV crew for a 25-minute documentary on the situation in the camps.

Society for Threatened Peoples (GfbV) address the Foreign and Europe Ministers of the 27 EU countries as well as the OHCHR and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to health and demands the immediate evacuation and medical treatment of all those living in the camps.