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Kosovo*: Commissioner Hammarberg calls for stop of forced returns and immediate evacuation of Roma from lead-contaminated camps

Strasbourg, 15.02.2010 - After the second visit within ten months to the lead-contaminated Roma camps of Cesmin Lug and Osterode in northern Kosovo, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammarberg, deplored that the situation for the inhabitants remains the same: "The fact that the camps have been inhabited for a full decade is no less than a scandal. The international community has a large part of the responsibility for this situation."

The lead permeates the soil, water and air, and the inhabitants', especially children's, lives in the camps are seriously damaged.

"The approximately 600 inhabitants need new, safe housing so that the camps can be closed. They are all in urgent need of medical treatment", underlined the Commissioner in connection with his visit in Kosovo in the middle of February.

Thomas Hammarberg also expressed his concern that several European governments are forcibly returning refugees to Kosovo. According to UN statistics more than 2 500 persons were returned from European countries during 2009. Some of the Roma returnees have ended up in the lead-contaminated camps. The refugees are mainly from Austria, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland.

"I call on European states to stop the forced returns until Kosovo can provide adequate living conditions, health care, schooling, social services and employment", said the Commissioner.

Kosovo has already signed readmission agreements with several countries. However, 20 000 internally displaced persons within Kosovo, and an unemployment rate of approximately 50 percent, clearly indicate that the country does not yet have the infrastructure that would allow a sustainable reintegration of refugees.

"A number of refugees have lived in the host countries for many years, and their children are born there, speak the language fluently and have no connection with Kosovo. The result is that many refugees return to the host countries as soon as possible", underlined Commissioner Hammarberg.

Press contact in the Commissioner's Office:

Stefano Montanari, +33 6 61 14 70 37; Stefano.montanari@coe.int

Office of the Commissioner for Human Rights Communication Unit

Tel: +33 (0)3 88 41 35 38

Fax: +33 (0)3 90 21 50 53
www.commissioner.coe.int
press.commissioner@coe.int

* "All reference to Kosovo, whether to the territory, institutions or population, in this text shall be understood in full compliance with United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244 and without prejudice to the status of Kosovo."