

KOSOVO ROMA REFUGEE FOUNDATION



REPORT FROM ROMA MAHALLA AND TOXIC CAMPS IN MITROVICA, KOSOVO

DATE: 17 October 2010

On October 12, Dija Gidzic, and Paul Polansky representing KRRF, visited the Kosovo Roma camps at Cesmin Lug and Osterode in north Mitrovica. Later they also visited their original neighborhood of Fabrica in south Mitrovica where 50 families have recently been returned under the USAID/Mercy Corps resettlement program.

This is their report.

Our first visit was to the Cesmin Lug camp, which UNHCR reported was demolished last month, with the families being moved to the more contaminated camp of Osterode.

At Cesmin Lug, we found not only all the Norwegian Church Aid built shacks completely bulldozed down but many Romani children now playing among the toxic ruins. Several children were also involved in digging up the electrical cables that once furnished the camp with electricity. The kids told us they could sell the wires for enough money to buy bread. I took photos of several boys (one as young as six years old) digging trenches several hundred meters long to retrieve the electrical wires.

Scattered throughout the camp ruins were piles of yellow insulating material that looked like asbestos to me. When the next-door Kablare camp was bulldozed down in 2006, I found asbestos had been used as an insulating material in the construction of those shacks and the children at that time were playing with it. I don't know if the Cesmin Lug insulation is also asbestos but I put a sample in a plastic bag to have it analyzed.¹

Many young Romani men were also working among the ruins salvaging wooden boards and beams to sell or use as firewood.

In their November 2000 report, the UN medical team warned about the high levels of heavy metals (esp. lead) in these camps and recommended

¹ Two days later a Serbian company in Nish that sells construction materials told me that this insulation was "glass wool," similar to asbestos and just as dangerous to touch with bare hands. Workers who install it are recommended to wear a face mask so they don't breathe in the glass fibers.

evacuation and fencing off these toxic lands so the general public could not accidentally enter. The UN administration in Kosovo ignored that UN medical report and instead built a sports ground on the toxic lands which is still in use. I believe that pressure must now be put on UNHCR (who claims to have demolished the camp) to fence off this wasteland so the Romani children living in camp Osterode (fifty meters away) don't use this toxic site as a playground and scavenging area. Pressure should also be put on UNHCR and the Kosovo government to fence off the "alley of health" sports ground area or at least to put up signs warning the public this area is dangerous (not good) for their health.

After taking more than 100 photos of the Cesmin Lug site and the kids there, we started to leave when I noticed a death poster on a wooden fence between the camp and the alley of health.

For years the UN and especially OSCE has been claiming that the camp Gypsies must be poisoning themselves because a Bosniak refugee couple who had built a small home between the camp and the toxic slag heaps were not suffering from lead poisoning.

The death notice was for Zaimovic Mevluda (1952-2010) who lived in the small house. She died at the age of 58 on 4 Oct 2010 in Mitrovica. The death notice did not give a reason for her death but I presume living for several years on this highly toxic land might have contributed to her early death. Nearby was a large cabbage patch, cabbage that I presume is being raised to sell in the local market despite it being grown on highly toxic land. In November 2000 the UN medical team for Mitrovica had recommended that all this land be fenced off so the general public could not enter these toxic lands. But as always the UN administration is not administrating where it should be.

After taking a photo of the death notice, we walked over to Camp Osterode, fifty meters away, and went directly to the office of KAAD, the administrators of the camp.

Much to my surprise, the KAAD staff who took over the administration in January 2009 from Norwegian Church Aid warmly greeted me. In the past, the staff has been under orders from their Albanian boss Albertina not to speak to me or give me information because of my advocacy on behalf of the camp Roma. However, today every member of the staff went out of their way to greet me and give us information. Later I found out the reason for their change of heart. Their boss Albertina has been accused of misuse of camp funds and is no longer in charge. So the order not to give me information is no longer in effect.

KAAD staff informed us that 50 out of the 140 camp families have now been resettled from Camp Osterode to the newly built homes in their old neighborhood of south Mitrovica. KAAD said that Mercy Corps hopes to finish another 40 homes before the end of October. If so, that would leave about 50 families still to be resettled next year.

Although the Kosovo government and UNHCR promised the international community and present donors that both Cesmin Lug and Osterode would be evacuated by the end of 2010, and the Roma medically treated upon their return to their old neighborhood, KAAD said this is now impossible.

When we asked about medical treatment for those Roma who have already returned to south Mitrovica, we were told that Mercy Corps was in charge. Under their USAID funded project, Mercy Corps is responsible for providing medical treatment for 30 months after resettlement under the terms of their contract. KAAD said that the Institute of Public Health in south Mitrovica was an implementing partner along with the Kosovo Ministry of Health but that the overall responsibility rests with Mercy Corps.

I asked if WHO (the World Health Organization) is involved. KAAD said no. Mercy Corps is supposed to follow the WHO Protocol for treatment of lead poisoning, but WHO is not even involved in the monitoring; only as consultants. So that leaves only us (KRRF) to monitor on behalf of the camp Roma to see if/when they receive medical treatment.

Although camp Roma have been returning to south Mitrovica since 2006, no child suffering from lead poisoning has been medically treated to date. According to Mercy Corps, they are only obliged to provide medical treatment for those returning now under the Mercy Corps/USAID project. Although 50 families have returned under their resettlement program during the last month, no one has yet received any medical treatment.

According to KAAD, the only Rom being treated is nine-year-old Ergin who is suffering a kidney disease and has been hospitalized six times in the past year in Belgrade. An Albanian nurse now goes to his new home in south Mitrovica every other day to make sure he is taking his medicine. However, the special diet recommended by his Belgrade doctors has yet to be taken over by Mercy Corps. Since it is an important part of his medical treatment, pressure must be put on Mercy Corps to supply this diet or pay for it (7 euros/day). Funds provided by private donors in the UK and USA to supply Ergin with this special diet will run out the end of October.

KAAD informed us that the camp Roma returning to south Mitrovica can still

seek medical treatment and schooling in Serb-administrated north Mitrovica. But the only place where lead poisoning can be treated in Serbia is in Belgrade, seven hours away by bus.

KAAD also informed us that several Romani families deported from Germany and Switzerland have applied to move into Camp Osterode but that KAAD has had to turn them down. Since the latest tests showed that Osterode is 10x more toxic than the former camp of Cesmin Lug, UNHCR and the Kosovo government want no more Roma living in Osterode after the present families are resettled. However, it is well known that these deported families do sneak into the camp at night to sleep with relatives. In fact, most are there during the day as well since there is no longer any security at the gate.

KAAD could not give us a precise date when the last 50 families would be evacuated from Camp Osterode. Since the construction season ends in November, the last 50 homes to be built in south Mitrovica cannot be started until next spring. Even then, ten families cannot return to Albanian-administered south Mitrovica because of political reasons (their men were in the Serbian army in 1999). Land has to be found in north Mitrovica and homes built by Mercy Corps before these families can leave Osterode. It now seems likely that camp Osterode will not be closed even in 2011.

After receiving promises of support and cooperation from the KAAD staff for future monitoring, we went to the Serb grocer who has been supplying the special diet for Ergin and his family. I paid the grocery bill to date (322 euros) and promised to pay until the end of October, Hopefully by that time Mercy Corps will live up to their obligation to include this special diet in their medical treatment of Ergin and his six-year-old brother Robert whose life doctors say might be in more danger than Ergin's.

From north Mitrovica we drove to south Mitrovica passing under a long line of Albanian flags the south Mitrovica Albs have hung on the north side of the river obviously trying to provoke a reaction from the Serbs in the north. The area is heavily patrolled by NATO troops (mainly French) and Serbian bridge watchers (civilian-dressed paramilitaries). I saw several that I personally know.

In the old Romani neighborhood of Fabricka in south Mitrovica, we found Ergin's family in their new home. Although I was warned that most of the former Osterode families only sleep in their new homes and spend most of the day back in Osterode, we found the Sahili family in residence.

They are very pleased with their new 75 m2 home and the furnishings supplied by Mercy Corps (sofa, rugs, washing machine, etc) but still hope

this resettlement is not forever. Robert's father told me that he still fears he will lose his children to lead poisoning unless they are medically treated. He said they have been in their new home for almost a month but have yet to have any blood tests taken. An Albanian nurse visits only Ergin (no other children) once every 48 hours to make sure he is taking his medicine. No one is paying any attention to six-year-old Robert who is less than half the size of Ergin. His stunted growth is probably due to a combination of malnutrition and lead poisoning. Dr. Savic of the Institute of Public Health in north Mitrovica fears Robert is sicker than Ergin.

It is well documented that UNHCR initiated blood tests for lead poisoning for many camp children in 2000 and every year since 2004. Despite some of those tests showing the highest recorded lead levels in medical literature, no child is being medically treated. At the Nuremberg war crimes trials it was declared that it was a crime to take medical tests and then not provide medical treatment if the tests proved positive.

Although Ergin's mother is now seven months pregnant with her eighth child, she fears having another baby with irreversible brain damage. In 2004, she and many Romani women in the camps begged us for the "pill" but we could never find any support for helping these women. In the past these women have usually confided in their Romani "sister" Dija Gidzic who has worked for KRRF in the camps since 2004 and was responsible for taking the only family who received medical treatment abroad (in Germany) after their mother and baby brother died of lead poisoning. Many of these women have confessed to Dija that they continue to carry out self-induced abortions by drinking beer mixed with yeast or drinking lice shampoo so they won't have another child born with irreversible brain damage due to lead poisoning.

Dija's experience with the camp Roma, esp. the women, was probably the main reason Mercy Corps hired her when they were awarded the USAID project to resettle these Roma. However, Dija was fired by Mercy Corps six months ago and replaced by the twice-married 21-year-old son of the Osterode camp leader who was put on the Mercy Corps payroll to convince the camp Roma to return to their old neighborhood although most were fearful to do so. As an added inducement to obtain the cooperation of Habib, the Osterode leader, 26 of the first 50 homes in the Mercy Corps project were given to Habib's relatives in the camps; not to the families suffering the highest lead levels. Although the camp Romani women have complained bitterly about no longer having a Romani woman on the Mercy Corps staff to hear their complaints and fears, Dija has now joined our monitoring program and will be meeting with these women once a week as she monitors the medical treatment that Mercy Corps is supposed to be carrying out.

When I arrived at Ergin's home, he was not there. I was, however, happy to hear that he was in school. Along with several resettled children, he is taken by school bus to classes in the north every day. His class runs from 12 noon to 4 pm. Therefore, I waited for him to come home.

During my wait, Ergin's parents told me that they are seriously considering taking Ergin out of school for good. Because of his illness, he is always very nervous and is always fighting with the other children (common symptoms of lead poisoning). He also misses a lot of school when he is rushed to hospital in Belgrade about every other month. Despite taking medicine every 48 hours and having a special diet, he still needs to be hospitalized too often for him to attend school on a regular basis.

I encouraged the parents to keep Ergin in school and said I would contact WHO for their advice on getting him better medical treatment. I asked if Mercy Corps had been by to see them, to check up on Ergin. His parents said only the Albanian nurse from the neighborhood clinic had been by. She was very good and came every 48 hours. However, she is only a nurse who makes sure Ergin is taking his medicine.

Ergin's mother showed me the latest medical report on Ergin's condition when he was recently released from hospital on October 1st. The report noted that there were still high levels of lead in Ergin's blood, but he is not being treated for that by Mercy Corps despite their mandate. According to an email received by KMEG from Mercy Corps, there was a "consensus" not to do any testing for one month after everyone is resettled. Then an initial screening test will be conducted, and a retest after three months.²

When Ergin finally arrived, we hugged and greeted each other as grandfather and grandson. He appeared very happy although I could see his face was swelling up again. He has only been back from hospital for twelve days. I spent half an hour with him, asking about school and his friends. I also took many photos of him with his parents and siblings.

Before leaving to check on the homes being built for the next 40 families under the Mercy Corps project, Ergin's parents once again pleaded with me to take them to another place (any place) where their children could be

² We could not find out who was involved in the "consensus" but none of the Romani families with children with high lead levels were consulted. In an email to KMEG, Mercy Corps stated that they are not obliged to do any medical treatment. Their project only provides necessary equipment, tools and materials for medical treatment. Testing and treatment is to be done by well trained health officials (presumably from the Institute of Public Health of south Mitrovica). But testing/treatment will be closely monitored by Mercy Corps Health Unit, according to their head of mission.

medically treated. They said a new house was not worth their children's lives. They wanted their children healthy more than a new house. I could only promise that we would do our best to make sure all the children being resettled received proper medical treatment. But this family was not hopeful that this is possible. Ergin's mother was quite distraught that she was going to have another baby with lead poisoning and brain damage.

When I asked her why she was continuing to have children, her husband answered it was God's will.

Before leaving Ergin's family, his parents once again begged us to take them where Ergin and Robert could be treated for lead poisoning. Safeta said that she is constantly getting up in the middle of the night to check if Ergin is breathing. Sometimes she feels he isn't and she has to shake him until she hears him breathing again.

Another concern for the family is that starting next month they have to pay for the electricity they use. Since Ergin's father doesn't have a job, paying for electricity will be impossible; another reason why they and most of the returnees continue to spend most of the day back in camp Osterode with friends and relatives.³

After leaving Ergin's family, I toured the rest of the neighborhood to take photos of the houses under construction. I must admit, the construction looked good with solid foundations, good roofs and reasonable finishing. However, like many construction projects, these homes were behind schedule and it does not seem likely they will be finished on time, by the end of October. They may not even be completed for the families to move in this year.

In future monitoring visits it will be necessary for us to consult with the local clinic established to medically treat these returnees and also the director of the Institute of Public Health of south Mitrovica who is the implementing partner of Mercy Corps. I also want to involve WHO in the monitoring process if only to seek their advice on the medical treatment or the lack of it. WHO press releases calls for immediate testing and medical treatment as soon as the Roma are resettled. However, as we have seen in this first

³ Although most of the new homes in the Roma Mahala have wood-burning stoves to heat their homes, they have no money to buy firewood. Because many of the new Mercy Corps built homes still have damp cement walls, the Roma go back to spend the day in Osterode with their relatives who have heating. Another factor is that in the Roma Mahala they do not have electricity fulltime as they do in Osterode. In the Roma Mahala they have electricity two hours on and then three hours off; so even if they have an electric heater it is of little use. Continued fear of the local Albanians is also a major problem for the returnees. As soon as the sun goes down, most families retreat inside their homes; few, if any, go out at night.

monitoring visit/report, no child is yet being tested or medically treated.

It is our intention to monitor the toxic wasteland at Cesmin Lug (where the Romani kids are now playing and working), the next-door camp of Osterode, and the Romani mahala in south Mitrovica once/week. We have funding from JDC to make these weekly visits over the period of the Mercy Corps project. However, it would be good if we could interest other donors to support our project so that we can provide more support for these families.

SUMMARY OF MONITORING VISIT:

Number of Children resettled in Roma Mahala: approx. 151

Number of these children being tested for lead poisoning: 0

Number of these children presently being treated for lead poisoning: 0

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(photos to follow)