

PRESENTATIONS IN BRUSSELS, LONDON, & DUBLIN

Paul Polansky, December 2008

Two hours from London by plane, in Eastern Europe, are two death camps, mainly for children under the age of six years. If these children don't die by the age of six, they will have irreversible brain damage for the rest of their short lives.

These camps have been running for nine years. They were built on the tailing stands of the biggest lead mine in Europe, and next to a toxic slagheap of 100 million tons. These camps (there used to be four) were built by the UN administration in Kosovo and their implementing partner Action by Churches Working Together. The hurriedly assembled barracks were also built with old lead painted boards.

To date 80 people have died in these camps, mainly due to complications from lead poisoning. More than 50 women have also aborted because of the lead poisoning. One woman and her baby died at childbirth. During her pregnancy she was being treated for lead poisoning. After her death it was discovered by a well-known laboratory in Chicago that two of her surviving nine children has the highest lead levels in medical history.

According to medical experts from Germany and the United States who have visited the camps, every child conceived in these camps will be born with irreversible brain damage.

These two UN death camps are not a new story although the deaths keep rising. In April 2005, I wrote about them in the International Herald Tribune. Shortly thereafter, ZDF (German TV) did a short feature program about the camps as did Al-Jazeera. Bild Zeitung, German's largest newspaper not only told the story, but also took seven children (after their mother and baby brother had died of lead poisoning) to Germany for medical treatment where body scans showed the children had damaged organs and irreversible brain damage.

This is how it happened.

On June 16, 1999, four days after NATO troops arrived, roving bands of extremist Albanians, led by black-uniformed Kosovo Liberation Army officers, attacked almost every Gypsy community in Kosovo. The Gypsies were told to flee or they would be killed. Out of a pre-war population of about 130,000, more than 100,000 Gypsies during the next three months fled Kosovo. After they left, more than 14,000 Gypsy homes were looted and then destroyed.

NATO troops refused to intervene, saying this was a problem for the local police. But there were no local police at that time. The Serbs had been the local police and they had been forced by NATO to withdraw to Serbia.

I personally witnessed part of this diaspora because in July 1999 the UN asked me to volunteer to go to Kosovo and advise them on their Gypsy problems. For three months I was the only non-Gypsy living 24 hours/day in the UN's largest camp, by Obilić-Obiliq. During the day I often drove to where Gypsies were being threatened. I especially visited the largest Gypsy community in Kosovo, in south

Mitrovicë/Mitrovica. There a community of more than 8,000 Gypsies (Roma, Ashkali and "Egyptians") living in more than 1,000 homes were being forced out while NATO troops stood by and watched. Most of these Mitrovicë/Mitrovica Gypsies fled abroad. About 1,000 sought refuge in a Serbian schoolhouse closed for the summer. For the next few months I arranged water and food through several aid agencies for these Gypsies who were camped out in the schoolhouse.

In November 1999, UNHCR took charge of these schoolhouse Gypsies and moved them to four hurriedly built camps on toxic wasteland, the only places the UN said were available. I protested, calling attention to UN officials and especially to the head of UNHCR in Prishtinë/Priština, that these toxic wastelands could be detrimental to the health of these IDPs (internally displaced people). UNHCR assured me that they had signed contracts with the local municipalities that these IDPs would be in these camps for only 45 days. At the end of 45 days, they would either have their homes rebuilt and moved back or would be taken as refugees to another country. Unfortunately, after almost nine years and many deaths due to lead poisoning, these IDPs are still living on toxic wasteland.

During the summer of 2000, the UN health officer for Mitrovicë/Mitrovica was asked by the UN administrator Dr. Bernard Kouchner to do a medical survey of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica because so many UN police and French soldiers were found to have high levels of lead in their blood. In November 2000, the UN health officer Dr. Andrej Andrejew's report was presented to UNMIK (the United Nations Mission in Kosovo) stating that most people living in the city of Mitrovicë/Mitrovica were suffering from lead poisoning. The report stated that the worst effected were the Gypsies living in the UN camps and recommended that the camps be evacuated and the areas fenced off so that the general public could not accidentally wander in. Dr. Bernard Kouchner, the present Foreign Minister of France, told his staff he was a medical doctor and understood the danger of lead poisoning. He promised to take appropriate measures. But the only thing he did was to close the smelter at nearby Trepca mines. He did not evacuate and close the Gypsy camps as recommended by the report, although the lead levels in the camps were three to four times higher than the general population.

Instead of closing the Gypsy camps, the UN built a 1.5-kilometer jogging track between two of the camps and the toxic slag heaps. The UN put up signs in four languages calling this jogging track the Alley of Health. The UN also built on land next to 100 million tons of toxic waste a soccer field and a basketball court for the Gypsy children. They were not told that exercise, opening the lungs, would make them more vulnerable to lead poisoning.

Despite repeated appeals to help the Gypsies, especially those living in the three camps in the area of north Mitrovicë/Mitrovica, the UN did just the opposite. All food aid was suspended in 2002 saying it was time for the Gypsies to find their own supplies. In the Zhitkovc/Žitkovac camp the running water was cut off for up to six months at a time because the camp administer, Churches Working Together, felt the Gypsies were using too much water. In the end, the Zhitkovc/Žitkovac Gypsies had to walk four kilometers twice a day to get their drinking water. In all three camps, most of the Gypsies had to go through the local garbage cans to find their food.

In the summer of 2004, WHO made a special investigation of lead poisoning in the three camps after Jenita Mehmeti, a four-year-old girl, died of lead poisoning. She was not the first. Up to that point 28 people (mainly children and young adults) had died in the three camps, but Jenita was the first one to be treated for lead poisoning before she died. New blood samples taken by WHO showed that many children, the most vulnerable to lead poisoning, had lead levels higher than WHO's analyzer could register.

The standard procedure for medical treatment of lead poisoning requires immediate evacuation from the source of poisoning and hospitalization if lead levels are above 40 µg/dL. Irreversible brain damage usually begins at 10 µg/dL especially in children under the age of six whose immune systems have yet to develop. Many of the lead levels of the Gypsy children in these three camps were over 65 µg/dL, the highest level the WHO machine could read. WHO staff suspected that some children (because of their symptoms) had lead levels in the 80s and 90s. As it turned out, two children had a lead level of 120 µg/dL, the highest in medical history.

In November 2004, WHO presented their health report on the Gypsy camps to UNMIK, recommending immediate evacuation. Although there were precedents for the UN evacuating thousands of Albanians and Serbians in Kosovo when they faced life-threatening events, these Gypsies were not evacuated. The only measure that the UN took was to being bi-monthly meetings with UN agencies and other NGOs to study the problem. Although many NGOs including the International Committee for the Red Cross petitioned the UN to immediately evacuate these "death camps" within 24 hours, no action was taken by the UN until 2006.

In January 2006 the UN in Kosovo closed one of the Gypsy camps and moved 35 families to a new location, about 50 meters from their old camp. The new camp was called Osterode. It was formerly a French army NATO base in north Mitrovicë/Mitrovica but had been abandoned after many soldiers were found to have lead poisoning. In fact, all French soldiers serving there were told by French military doctors not to father a child for nine months after leaving the camp because of the high lead levels in their blood.

Nevertheless, the UN in their wisdom spent more than 500,000 euros (donated by the German government) to refurbish this camp. Feeling that most of the lead poisoning came from the ground, the UN cemented over much of the area and then obtained a certificate from CDC, the Center for Disease Control, a US funded agency, that the camp was "lead safe." Although all these camps were built on the tailing stands of the Trepca lead mines, most of the lead pollution comes through the air from the 100 million tons of toxic slag heaps in front of the camps.

In September 2006, at his first press conference as head of the UN in Kosovo, Herr Joachim Ruecker proudly announced that the UN was doing something to help these Gypsies dying of lead poisoning. In addition to moving them from their camps to Osterode camp, which he declared was not lead safe but "lead safer" the UN would begin to treat lead poisoning with a better diet. For the first time in four years food aid would now be given to the Gypsies so that they would no longer have to go through the local garbage cans. The US office in Prishtinë/Priština donated \$1,000,000 for this "better diet."

It is well known to medical doctors that a proper diet can lower lead levels by about 20%, but only if the affected person is first removed from the source of poisoning. In the case of these infected Gypsies, reducing their lead levels by 20% would still leave them with life-threatening levels. For the first time in four years, the UN also provided a daily medical staff to look after the health of these Gypsies. Unfortunately, lead poisoning can only be treated once the patient is removed from the source of lead poisoning. In any event, the medical staff later resigned because they had not been paid for months.

By spring 2006 two of the Gypsy camps (Zhitkovc/Žitkovac and Kablar/Kablare) had been closed with more than 100 families now living in Osterode camp. After three months, blood samples were taken and according to UNMIK the health of the Gypsies was improving, thanks to their new diet, and lead levels were falling. However, WHO and UNMIK refused to share copies of these blood results with the public or even with the Gypsy families themselves. Later I was given copies of the tests by a disgruntled WHO staffer who was tired of the cover up. The test results showed that the lead levels had not only risen, but that Osterode, the lead free camp now had higher lead levels than the nine-year-old Çesmin Llug/Česmin Lug camp.

In 2006 the UN announced that the only solution for the Gypsies living on or near the toxic wastelands was to rebuild their homes in their old neighbourhood and move them back. Thus the UN enlisted several international donors to rebuild some of the Gypsy homes and several apartment blocks with the promise to move the lead-infected Gypsies back to their old neighbourhood. Unfortunately, as soon as these homes and apartments were finished in the summer and fall of 2006, the UN did not give all the apartments to the Gypsies living on toxic wasteland, but mainly to Kosovo Gypsy refugees the UN wanted to bring back from Serbia and Montenegro to show that their return policy of refugees was working.

In April 2007 all food and medical aid at Osterode camp was stopped because the UN said it was running out of money. Once again the Gypsies were forced to find their only food by going through the local garbage cans. But worst of all was yet to come.

Because many children at Osterode camp and in the adjoining camp of Çesmin Llug/Česmin Lug were showing common signs of lead poisoning (lead on their teeth, daily vomiting, and memory loss), the camp leaders insisted on new blood test in April 2008. Random blood tests of 105 children showed staggering results. For many of the children living in the UN "lead safer" camp of Osterode, their lead levels had doubled since moving into the former French base.

Because the UN, UNHCR and UNHCHR refuse to help these citizens of Kosovo, I have appealed directly to the Minister of Health for the newly declared country of Kosovo. Dr. Alush Gashi is not only a medical doctor but also a personal friend of mine for several years. He once lived and worked in San Francisco. I not only appealed to him by email, but also visited him in his office, begging him to help his minority citizens. He understands the problem. He understands the situation. As a medical doctor he knows that these Gypsies need to be evacuated immediately. In a recently filmed interview with Dr. Gashi, he acknowledged that these Gypsies should be evacuated immediately, that they would be better off in prison than in

the death camps. He said that USAID was funding a project with Mercy Corps to save these people.

It didn't take me long to get a copy of the USAID/Mercy Corp project. It called for the resettlement of 50 of the 120 families living in the camps over the next 2.5 years. There was no immediate medical solution for anyone living in the camps. Evacuation was not mentioned. Later I found out that the author of the project has never even visited the camps. Yet USAID is handing over \$2.4 million, for this cosmetic solution.

Since 2005 we have tried to force the UN to help these Gypsies. An American lawyer, Dianne Post, has tried to sue the UN on behalf of several hundred Gypsies living in these camps. Her lawsuit against the UN at the court of Human Rights in Strasbourg was turned down because the court declared that only a country, not an organization, could be sued. Although the UN was the sole administrator of Kosovo, the court decided that UN could not be sued.

The UN does have a policy of compensation for such problems. But UN lawyers for three years have refused to cooperate in seeking compensation for these Gypsies or resolving their health problems. The UN does not deny responsibility but refuses to comply with its own rules and standards.

In 2005 the Society for Threatened Peoples¹, the largest NGO in Germany after the Red Cross, brought to Kosovo the leading German expert on toxic poisoning, Dr. Klaus Runow. Although the UN tried to bar him from the camps, he was able to take about 60 hair samples from the Gypsy children. He sent the hair samples to a well-known laboratory in Chicago. The results showed that not only did many of the children have the highest lead levels in medical history, but that all had toxic poisoning from 36 other heavy metals as well. In trying to defend themselves, UN personal have often claimed that the Gypsies got their lead poisoning from smelting car batteries. However, Dr. Runow pointed out that none of these other toxic metals are found in car batteries.

Dr. Rohko Kim, a Harvard trained medical doctor employed by WHO in Bonn, Germany, has been advising the UN on the lead poisoning in their camps in Kosovo. Although he is under orders not to give interviews or information about the Gypsy camps, I got him to speak to me. I asked him if the lead poisoning was due to the Gypsies smelting car batteries. He said no. He said most of the lead poisoning came from the toxic dust of the slagheap and from the fact that the camps were built on the tailing stands of the mines. He said that every child conceived in the camps would have irreversible brain damage. He said that we had already lost an entire

¹ (Gesellschaft für bedrohte Völker (GfbV) / Society for Threatened Peoples (STP) is an international human rights organisation which campaigns with and on behalf of threatened and persecuted ethnic and religious minorities, nationalities and indigenous peoples. Its ideologically and party-politically impartial human rights work on behalf of the Tibetans, Moluccans, Adivasi, Kurds, Yezidi, Assyrian-Chaldaeans, Christians, Baha'i, Southern and Western Sudanese, Sahraouis, Acehans, Yanomami, Navajo, Aborigines, Chechens, Itelmen, Bosnians, Sorbs, Sinti and Roma and many other ethnic groups on every continent experiencing the threat of persecution has been formally recognised by the United Nations. GfbV/STP also has participatory status with the Council of Europe).
http://www.gfbv.de/gfbv_deutschland.php

generation of Gypsy children to lead poisoning. In a speech delivered in 2005 to WHO, UNMIK and the Kosovo

Ministry of Health, Dr. Kim said: "The present situation in the Roma community who are now living in the camps is extremely serious. I have personally researched lead poisoning since 1991, but I have never seen in the literature a population with such a high level of lead in their blood. I believe that the lead poisoning in north Mitrovicë/Mitrovica is unique, which has never been known before in history. This is one of the biggest catastrophes connected with lead in the world and in history."

To date 80 Gypsies have died in the UN camps. Even more miscarriages have occurred. The UN has never investigated one death in the camps or ever made an autopsy. However, from the symptoms described by relatives and neighbours, doctors consulted believe that lead poisoning contributed to most of the deaths and miscarriages.

A few months ago another Gypsy baby died in Osterode camp. It was one month old and had been born with a large head, swollen belly and miniature legs. It woke at six in the morning, vomiting, and died twenty minutes later in hospital.

Lead poisoning is a hideous and painful death for children. Four-year-old Jenita Mehmeti was attending the camp kindergarten when her teacher noticed she was losing her memory and finding it hard to walk. Jenita was sent back to her barracks where for the next three months she vomited several times a day, before becoming paralyzed and dying. When her two year old sister came down with the same symptoms, the UN doctor for Mitrovicë/Mitrovica refused to treat her saying she was in a UN camp one kilometer out of his jurisdiction. An NGO took her to Belgrade and saved her life.

In 1999, the US office in Prishtinë/Priština airlifted 7,000 Albs to Fort Dix, NJ, to protect them from Serbs. In March 2004, the UN police and KFOR evacuated 4,000 Serbs to KFOR bases to save them from Albs. There are precedents in Kosovo for saving lives, but not 500 Gypsy lives.

Thus, this is an appeal to you. In Europe today we have death camps for children. Please do something about it.