



UK Association of Gypsy Women

Suite 3a, Imperial Business Centre Grange Road Darlington DL1 5NQ

Phone: 01325 788281 Mobile: 07880-637591: Fax 0161-8830440

E-mail ukagw@ymail.com rfukagw@live.co.uk

2 February 2010

Dear Colleagues

The UK Association of Gypsy Women has embarked on a campaign that will call on the UN for immediate evacuation and re-settlement of the Roma community residing on lead contaminated camps in Kosovo. We are appealing for the support of Romany/Roma/Traveller NGO's, individuals and all human rights organisations that will use their influence to lobby European and US Governments, not least Antonio Guterres UN High Commission for Refugees and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki- moon regarding the plight of the Roma community residing on the Osterode and Cesmin-Lug refugee camps in Northern Kosovo.

The families' original homes were at the "Roma Mahalla", on the southern shore of the Ibar River, part of the oldest Mahalla in the Balkans, having thrived for almost 150 years. The homes here were burned by Kosovan Albanians in an attempt of ethnic cleansing as the conflict for Kosovo was ending: The families were packed into the contaminated camps by the UNHCR with an assurance their stay would be for just 45 days until a safer place could be found, however that was more than a decade ago.

The Roma refugee camps were built close to the Trepca lead mine and smelting works. The factory was closed by order of the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UMIK) in 2000, but the slag heaps were never cleaned up. Osterode camp is overlooked by a 200 metre high mountain of 100 million tons of toxic lead waste. Deadly grey dust blows continually down on the camp below, subjecting the families on a daily basis to toxic lead poisoning on an unprecedented scale.

There are some 650 families, with around 400 children, 200 of which are under the age of ten, residing on Osterode. So far 77 deaths to date in the camp, their organs have simply packed up. Furthermore, even if an immediate evacuation-re-settlement is orchestrated, it will take up to 10 years of intensive medical treatment to rid their blood of the poison. Meanwhile, as many as 200 children are forgotten and abandoned by the UNHCR.

The lead blackens the children's teeth, blanks out their memory and stunts their growth: mood swings from nervous hyperactivity to something akin to coma; epileptic fits etc, every child conceived on the camps will be born with irreversible brain damage. Armed with this knowledge then and the evidence of the highest levels of poison in the blood ever recorded in history on humans, self affected abortion is preferable.

Dorit Nitzan of World Health Organisation (WHO) regional office, Belgrade, warned this is the worst lead poisoning that they know of in Europe. Lead in the blood is measured in micrograms per deciliter, measured in tens. More than 100 mg/dl in the blood is considered a catastrophically high level. (WHO tests showed the children had so much lead in their blood that medical equipment could not measure it accurately. It should be noted allegedly, that the Kosovo Force (KFOR) soldiers working in the contaminated areas were frequently tested for lead poisoning and were relocated to other parts of the province if the results were above acceptable limits.

Medical treatment, known as "Chelation"; was given to some of the children to clear the blood of the lead- sponsored by WHO but, the success of the treatment assumes that the children have been removed from the source of the pollution. Only one family is known to have left the camp, they were taken to Germany for their child to receive treatment and re-settled there.

Leading toxicologist Professor Alistair Hay, UK Government advisor, said he had never encountered a situation in all the years he had been looking at lead where the situation is as catastrophic as it is for these children.

In 2008 the UNHCR and its sister organisation, UNMIK, abandoned the people on the camps and handed responsibility of them over to the Kosovan Government. The WHO, International Committee Red Cross (ICRC) and Human Rights Watch (HRW) have called for immediate evacuation and proper medical treatment for the people on the camps.

Roma families are being 'voluntarily' and forcibly returned from European Countries back to Kosovo steadily, it seems with utter disregard to the life-threatening situation in which they may find themselves. Widespread discrimination against Roma people in Kosovo and the political, security and economic situation is not conducive to their return, moreover, one would imagine, that obtaining documentation and the repossession of property would prove to be extremely difficult for them.

We believe, the Dutch and Norwegian Governments have funded the re-building of the Roma Mahalla in Southern Mitrovica, the US Government have also launched a new project to re-house 50 families from Cesmin Lug where children go barefoot even in the winter on the polluted earth, however, the Roma people cannot be expected to feel safe going back to live in the Kosovan Albanian majority south after what happened in 1999, nor should they be encouraged or forced to do so.

Paul Polansky: Author, Historian, Poet, and Former Advisor to the UN on Roma in 1999, and Human Rights Activist, has tried in vain to get the refugees human rights recognised, has recently returned from a week in the camps. He told me of nine year old Ergin who is suffering from Kidney Failure and his seven year old brother, who shares Ergin's special diet, he is five years old and is in an even worse condition than Ergin. Although, Ergin has been hospitalised six or seven times during the past year, he will not survive without his special diet. Neither will his brother.

Ergin was taken off the special diet last September by the Kosovo Agency for Advocacy & Development, who are a Pristina-based Albanian NGO that has a contract with the Minister of Communities and returns to administer the Romani camps in north Mitrovica, KAAD said: the government could no longer meet the cost of the 7 euro's a day for the special diet. Theirs will be probably be, the next two deaths in Osterode. It appears then, that the Kosovan government can find a better use for that 7 euro's a day, other than to spend it on rescuing two little children from the jaws of death.

As Paul Polansky said, we have already lost an entire generation of Romani children to irreversible brain damage', his contention is that it is doubtful, that they will be able to father another generation

We strongly feel that the situation of the Romany/Roma/Traveller people across the whole of Europe today, especially that of Osterode and Cesmin Lug camps are frighteningly reminiscent of events preceding the holocaust and can no longer be ignored. An article in 1996 in the Observer, by Nick Cohen, stated 'Gypsies have become the Jews of Europe'. It drew comparisons with the attitudes towards the Jews of the 1930s and the Gypsies of the 90s, comparisons that in UKAGW view remain unchanged today. The situation in Kosovo needs intervention as a matter of urgency.

In 2000, the EU leaders pledged to make a decisive impact on the eradication of poverty by 2010, mindful of this then, the time is now for all human rights activists to lobby for the immediate evacuation and re-location, of the Roma community from the living hell that they are forced to endure on a daily basis on the toxic waste camps in Kosovo.

Rachel Francis-Ingham