

Gypsy families in Kosovo on toxic land

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NORTH MITROVICA, Kosovo - No one seems to care about the gypsies. Displaced by conflict and stranded by bureaucratic inertia, dozens of gypsy families remain on toxic land 10 years after they were relocated there by the United Nations after the Kosovo war.

Lead blackens the children's teeth, blanks out memories and stunts growth. Other symptoms of lead poisoning include aggressive behavior, nervousness, dizziness, vomiting and high fever. The children swing between bursts of nervous hyperactivity and fainting spells. Some have epileptic fits.

The two resettlement camps — the Osterrode and Chesmin Lug — were established by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1999 for gypsies, or Roma, as they are more commonly known in Europe. A traditionally nomadic people, the Roma share a common heritage that sets them apart as an ethnic group, with their largest populations in Central and Eastern Europe.

The camps, near a closed mining and smelting complex that includes a slag heap of 100 million tons of toxic materials, were intended as a temporary measure after a neighborhood that had been home to 9,000 gypsies was destroyed by ethnic Albanians as Serb security forces pulled out of the area in the final days of the Kosovo conflict in June 1999. The neighborhood was on the southern shore of the Ibar River, which separates Serb-dominated northern Mitrovica from a southern, Albanian-dominated part.

The Albanians, furious at what they called atrocities by the Serbs during the war, accused the Roma of collaborating with the Serb army. The Roma say they hardly were in a position to do anything but struggle for their own survival and that the Albanians used them as a scapegoat.

Whatever the truth behind the accusations and denials, moving Roma families next to a slag heap of toxic materials including lead, zinc, arsenic and other metals has made dozens of families suffer severe health problems and spawned a generation of brain-damaged children.

When the World Health Organization tested the camp residents' blood for lead in 2004, the readings for 90 percent of the children were off the scale, higher than the medical equipment was capable of measuring. The measurements from the camps were much higher than in the surrounding population and at levels that exceeded any region WHO had previously studied. Twelve children had exceptionally high blood lead levels, greater than 45 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood, more than four times the amount that causes brain damage.

Such children fall into the category of "acute medical emergency" and require immediate hospitalization. Instead, the Roma children have remained in the camps, ingesting lead through the air, the dirt they play in and through their clothes dusted with lead tailings

while drying on laundry lines. Even before their birth, lead enters them as they grow inside their mothers' wombs from the water they drink.

'Conceived in lead'

"They are conceived in lead," said Paul Polansky, head of mission for the Society for Threatened Peoples International. The Switzerland-based organization is dedicated to publicizing the plight of people who are menaced by such threats but have few prominent advocates.

"They have to be immediately evacuated from the camps and medically treated. The only hope is to get them abroad," he said.

One reason the situation has become so dire is that the Roma are not considered refugees by the U.N. but rather "internally displaced people." That means they do not fit U.N. criteria for financing their resettlement abroad.

Even if the Roma were classified as refugees, it would be difficult to find countries to accept them, Mr. Polansky said. "So far, no country has come forward to offer assistance," he said.

Like HIV/AIDS, lead attacks the immune system and can be fatal, though death from lead poisoning is difficult to determine. Most of those who have fallen ill in the camps have been treated in Serbian hospitals, and human rights groups have had difficulty getting their medical records.

According to internationally accepted benchmarks drawn up by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 10 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood causes the beginning of brain damage.

"My children get sick often," said Muzafera Seljimi, sitting on a bench in Osterrode where she lives with her husband and four children. The left front tooth of her 4-year-old daughter was almost entirely covered by lead emerging from her gum. "How can I treat her as long as we live in these conditions?" Mrs. Seljimi said.

Thomas Hammarberg, European Commissioner for Human Rights, called the camps a "tragedy." "The Roma are victimized by lead," he said. "It is sad the international community has not found a solution 10 years later. It is the single most major environmental disaster in Europe."

Signs of war

Kosovo has been administered by the United Nations since June 1999, as the war ended after a six-week NATO bombing campaign on the troops of President Slobodan Milosevic. The war was aimed at halting Belgrade's repression of the majority ethnic Albanian population in Kosovo.

A decade later, it is hard to see the signs of a war that killed at least 1,500 civilians and resulted in the Roma's plight. On a recent afternoon, university students walked down the street singing to tunes on their iPods. Restaurants and Internet cafes bustled with business and cars clogged the narrow, well-lit streets.

But anger from the war and the ethnic animosities that still haunt the Balkans are apparent. Graffiti sprayed in thick red paint across the walls of old communist-era cinder block apartment complexes castigate the U.N. presence. Vendors sell postcards with a black slash through "U.N." and T-shirts with a sodomized Mickey Mouse dismissing the

West with vulgarities. Other T-shirts promise that the Serb army "will be back." The ongoing rivalry in this city divided between Serbs and Albanians has bred a paranoia and distrust of anybody from outside either group, making it possible for the Roma to be sidelined into the toxic camps. "Gypsies," Mr. Polansky said, "are not the flavor of the month in any country."

Memory lapses

Hajrizi Rodna, 53, an Osterrode camp schoolteacher, holds classes in an aluminum shed built by UNHCR. Pencil drawings decorated the walls on a recent morning, and a poster beside a green chalkboard listed letters in the English alphabet.

"A lot of them have bad memories," she said. "When I dictate something, some of them only write a few words and stop. They are confused and look lost." The Jahirovic family has lived near the school since 2004 in two rooms of what used to be a French army barracks. The pink walls reflected the afternoon light coming through the open windows along with the sounds of women scrubbing carpets and children stomping in the resulting puddles. Feruz Jahirovic, 44, a father of four children, took little comfort in their laughter.

"My son is sick," he said. "All of my children have high levels of lead." He displayed medical documents from the Institute of Public Health in Mitrovica that indicated his 9-year-old son's blood lead level was 43.7 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood, more than four times the amount that causes brain damage.

"He has pains in his bones like rheumatism," Mr. Jahirovic said. "He has stomach pains and headaches. He can not walk well and his memory is weak. I am their father. I see these things." The family has taken harsh measures to prevent the spread of lead poisoning in more children. Mr. Jahirovic's wife, Flanza, said she deliberately caused herself to have six miscarriages.

"My child is an example of why I should not have any more children," she said as her husband nodded in agreement. "I am sorry for the lost babies, but I do not want any more children born with poison." In Chesmin Lug, Muhamud Smajliji also worried about the health of his family. His home, a squat shack pieced together from scrap wood, lacked basic sanitation. Plastic sheeting served for windows below which a trash fire burned. A jogging trail built by the U.N. for the Roma twisted and turned downhill from his shack in the shadows of the slag heap.

"I know well what lead is," Mr. Smajliji, 29, said, "and what lead does." Mr. Smajliji's 10-year-old son has a lead blood level of more than 65 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood, more than six times the amount that causes brain damage. "He is slow growing," Mr. Smajliji said of his son. "For the moment, his memory is OK. All my children are nervous. My daughter once had a high fever and fainted three times."

Critics accuse U.N. of 'genocide'

Between 2005 and 2008, Zoran Savich, a pediatrician with the Health Center of Kosovo Mitrovica, saw more than 300 patients in Osterrode and Chesmin Lug. In that time, he said, 77 people died of lead poisoning, many of them children. "I treated as many as I could but they were living in the same conditions and absorbing lead," Dr. Savich said. "When the treatments stopped, their levels went back up. It was useless."

Critics of the United Nations say the international organization knowingly put the Roma on toxic land. Mr. Polansky has gone so far as to accuse the U.N. of "genocide." It is an accusation that Francesco Ardisson, senior protection officer of the office of Chief of Mission for the UNHCR in Pristina, dismissed as "an exaggeration."

"In 1999, we had to respond to an emergency and found the camps as a temporary facility," Mr. Ardisson said. "Unfortunately, we have been unable to find an alternative site because neither the Albanians nor the Serbs want them."

The Roma have grown impatient with excuses. On April 9, a date recognized as International Roma Day, Roma in the Chesmin Lug and Osterrode camps held a silent protest by holding candles and signs that read, "Save Us." On the same day, four leading European human rights bodies, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe's (OSCE) Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, and the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities expressed "deep concern about the continuing discriminatory treatment and exclusion of the Roma." Even within the U.N., questions have been raised about its handling of the Roma.

"The U.N. put the Roma in the camps even though the U.N. knew the place was poisoned," said Ilija Elezovic, the health department director for the U.N. Mission in Kosovo, northern Mitrovica. "The place where the camps are, the U.N. had a plan to build a fence around it and say, 'danger.' But they didn't do that. Instead, they put the Roma there." Mr. Elezovic said his own blood lead level was 16 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood.

"Everyone is poisoned here," he said, "especially the Roma." Mercy Corps, an American aid organization, has budgeted \$2.4 million to resettle 50 Roma families — about 250 people — this year in either north or south Mitrovica away from the contaminated sites.

Most of the budget would be applied to new housing although treatment for lead poisoning is also included, said Catherine Rothenberger, a Mercy Corps administrator in Kosovo. She said more families would be moved if donors see resettlement programs succeed. That means that in the meantime, many families will be left in the camps.

"Resources are not an issue but a clear plan is," Ms. Rothenberger said. "Donors are reluctant to invest unless it results in productive resettlement." Some Roma who have been resettled by other international aid organizations face other dangers.

"I have seen many times Albanians beating up Roma here," said Gushani Bekim, 24, who with his wife and three children was resettled in a newly built apartment in the Albanian stronghold of south Mitrovica. "I need work, but it is not safe to work here." As government and aid organizations debate what to do, the Roma continue to wait.

"I get nervous, start to shake, and it takes long time to calm down," said Mr. Smajliji, speaking of his own health problems. "While we wait for someone to do something, I feel myself losing power. I am losing concentration. I feel like collapsing."

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