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Contacts:  
Nicole Mailman

## Kosovo: UN Delay in Responding to Lead Poisoning Threatens Roma

Despite repeated health warnings, the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) has delayed for over a year evacuation of hundreds of internally displaced Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptian (RAE) from highly toxic camps poisoned by lead.

The UN's intransigence is condemning children to severe lead poisoning, possibly resulting in irreversible mental and physical retardation. Refugees International raised this issue with UNMIK in June. Even though the World Health Organization, human rights and government officials have pressed UNMIK and local governments to act, the poisoning continues.

Over the summer, there was increasing local and international attention and pressure on UNMIK to take immediate action to evacuate the camps. In June, Dr. Walter Kalin, the UN Secretary General's Representative on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, affirmed that the situation is an "emergency" and that "a failure to act now would amount to a violation of the right of the affected children to have their health and physical integrity protected." In September, the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) filed a request with the prosecutor to begin an investigation to find who was responsible for "causing serious personal injury to the Roma" under Article 291(5) of the Kosovo Provisional Criminal Code and to bring criminal charges against them. ERRC has argued if those persons responsible have immunity, then immunity must be lifted.

Refugees International briefed several Congressional offices and in August, at RI's urging, Congressman Tom Lantos, ranking member of the Committee on International Relations, issued a letter to Soren Jessen-Peterson, Special Representative of the Secretary General (SRSG), and John Bolton, US Representative to the United Nations. After RI spoke to the US State Department and Center of Disease Control (CDC), they assessed the situation. As a result, the US Mission in Kosovo has expressed commitment to working on a resolution. At an OSCE (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) meeting in Warsaw on September 21<sup>st</sup>, Marc Mezmar of the US Bureau of

Population, Refugees and Migration, stated, "The United States urges the UN authorities to establish an uncontaminated site for this population immediately, to rebuild the community, and to provide timely medical treatment for the families now suffering from lead poisoning. The U.S. Government is responding to this humanitarian emergency and we encourage other governments to do the same."

Environmental standards for the mining industry must be set and strictly enforced by UNMIK and the future government. In August, the Independent Commission for Mines and Minerals (ICMM) issued permits for the reopening of 18 mines, including five of the Trepca lead mines, which are suspected of polluting the camp sites. The re-opening of these mines brings significant promises of economic development to a population suffering from 70% unemployment; the market value of these mines is estimated to be €6 billion. In the 1980s, they employed 20,000 workers and represented 70% of all Yugoslavia's mineral wealth. However, the economic gain from mining should not continue to come at the steep cost of the population's health. In 2000, now former SRSG, Bernard Kouchner said, "The people of Mitrovica are at risk because of this [Zvecan] smelter...As a doctor, as well as chief administrator of Kosovo, I would be derelict if I let this threat to the health of children and pregnant women continue for one more day."

United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) increasingly recognized the urgency of evacuation, admitted delay in responding to the problem, and cooperated with international agencies and local government to find an evacuation site. The Mitrovica Action Team (MAT) was formed over the summer with the purpose of coordinating the agencies overseeing the Risk Management Strategy in the camps and ensuring the education of the RAE population on lead poisoning and

the need for evacuation. Members of MAT include representatives from UN agencies, the World Health Organization (WHO), UNMIK and KFOR (Kosovo Force). Unfortunately, too few NGO's or individuals representing the Roma are included in the planning, which is a great source of conflict.

In July, the newly formed MAT seemed to have agreed that the RAE could be evacuated to an agricultural site, which is located next to the Roma Mahala in South Mitrovica, where 70 percent of the residents in the lead-contaminated camps lived before the war. In August UNMIK, KFOR, and Kosovo Protection Corps (KPC) finally organized and completed the first phase of clearing rubble in the Roma Mahala left from the destruction of houses and buildings in 1999. They had planned to continue with the second phase in September, but there appears to have been a problem with the clearing of the foundations and work has to be redone. The hope was that if the evacuation site was close by the Roma Mahala, the RAE population would be able to see their homes being rebuilt, which would bring assurance that the evacuation site would be temporary.

However, tests of the soil conducted by WHO and UNMIK showed that the lead levels of the evacuation site were also dangerously high and plans for evacuation to that site were canceled. Alternative sites are currently under consideration. It is imperative that the evacuation, closure of the lead-contaminated camps, and start of rebuilding of the Roma Mahala occur before a decision on final status of Kosovo, which is expected to move forward in the next few months and probably will bring further population shifts and changing of political priorities.

#### **REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:**

- ❑ Regular testing of all IDPs in the RAE camps continue and any person testing above 45 micrograms per deciliter be given immediate medical attention and relocated. Written documentation of the testing be given to all persons (or their parents) tested. Clear and consistent information should be given to all camp residents about the presence of the lead and the medical impact of lead on the body.
- ❑ UNMIK should immediately include RAE in the discussions and inform them of the new plans for evacuation (which should occur by December at the very latest), its timeline for rebuilding the Roma Mahala, and the explanation of why the evacuation site is not by the Mahala.
- ❑ Nations of the UN Security Council should urge for resolution of this issue before approval is issued for a decision on Kosovo's final status.

- ❑ International donors provide the necessary funds for an emergency action plan that must include evacuation and destruction of these three IDP camps.
- ❑ The World Bank and/or the European Agency for Reconstruction commit to a comprehensive environmental clean up of the North Mitrovica lead sites as recommended in the UNMIK November 2000 report.
- ❑ Independent Commission for Mines and Minerals (ICMM) set strict guidelines to minimize further pollution of lead and other heavy metals, as well as ways to evaluate compliance and enforce penalties for not complying. Companies working on preparing the reopening of mines and environmental clean-up, such as Sinclair Knight Merz Group, should make their findings public.

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*Nicole Mailman is Advocacy Associate for Refugees International. She completed an assessment mission to Kosovo in June.*