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## **Serbian Roma families facing forced eviction**

Amnesty International today urged the Belgrade authorities to halt plans to destroy a Roma settlement amid fears that an eviction could be imminent.

At least 70 families living in an informal settlement in the Vidikovac area of the Serbian capital, many of whom fled there after being forcibly evicted from other sites, could be left homeless again if the demolition goes ahead.

"The authorities have yet to find a long-term solution for Roma who, after seeing their homes repeatedly destroyed, live in constant fear of being evicted at any time without warning," said Sian Jones, Amnesty International's expert on Serbia.

Under international law, evictions can only be carried out as a last resort, once all other alternatives have been exhausted.

The Belgrade authorities have not offered the families any alternative accommodation or compensation. They have failed to consult the community, instead issuing them with two eviction notices in April and mid-June, the latter threatening the settlement with eviction from early July.

"The city authorities have no respect for the Roma people's dignity and human rights, we have been suffering discrimination in this society for far too long," a Roma activist, who wants to remain anonymous due to fear of eviction, told Amnesty International after her visit to Vidikovac on 30 July.

"The youngest of the Vidikovac residents are the most vulnerable to forced evictions. We are talking about kids with no chance to live normally. They can't learn like other children, their health is at risk."

Thirty-five of the families at risk of eviction joined the Vidikovac settlement in April 2010, when their homes on the other side of the street were destroyed by the Belgrade authorities. They were offered no alternative accommodation, assistance or compensation.

Another 20 families arrived at site after being evicted from a nearby area without prior notice, leaving them unable to rescue anything but the few belongings they could carry. Promises of food and assistance from the authorities failed to materialise.

"This vicious circle of forced evictions can only be broken through the development of a sustainable resettlement plan, which ensures the right to adequate housing for all affected communities," said Sian Jones.

Many of the Roma families living in Vidikovac were forcibly returned to Serbia from several EU states

between 2006 and 2008.

Many had left Southern Serbia in the 1990s in search for work and, after failing to find adequate housing or employment when returned to their home towns, joined informal Roma settlements across Belgrade.

The Belgrade authorities have reportedly said the city's settlements will be removed because they lack proper sanitation. However, they have not specified where families living on the site can be relocated or how their human rights will be protected when their homes are demolished.

“The authorities act as if it is our fault that we live in the settlements, as if it is our choice. What other choice have we got? If you are Roma you haven't got many choices,” the Roma activist said.

Amnesty International's Demand Dignity campaign aims to end the human rights violations that drive and deepen global poverty. The campaign will mobilise people all over the world to demand that governments, corporations and others who have power listen to the voices of those living in poverty and recognise and protect their rights. For more information visit <http://demanddignity.amnesty.org/campaigns-en/>