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UK: Irish Travellers could face forced eviction

Amnesty International is calling on the UK authorities to stop a planned eviction that would leave up to 86 Irish Traveller families homeless or without adequate alternative housing.

Local authorities in Essex, east of London, have given the families living at Dale Farm notice to leave the site by 31 August and say they will cut off water and electricity supplies following the eviction.

“Up to 400 people could be left homeless as a result of the forced eviction which would require them to vacate their plots without an authorized site to which they can take their caravans,” said Jezerca Tigani, Deputy Director, Europe and Central Asia Programme at Amnesty International.

“The authorities must ensure that their actions do not break international law. They should instead talk to the residents of Dale Farm and reach a negotiated solution.”

The eviction notice applies to plots on Dale Farm that the local authority, Basildon Council, says are “unauthorised developments”.

Despite the land being owned by Traveller, Romani and Gypsy families, the Irish Travellers have been denied repeated requests to build residential properties there because of local zoning restrictions.

The proposed eviction would leave residents of Dale Farm without alternative culturally adequate accommodation and without access to essential services such as continuous medical treatment for residents with serious illnesses and schooling for the estimated 110 children living there.

While some residents have been offered ‘bricks and mortar’ housing, many do not want this, and the council has not offered alternative housing that to all those residents facing eviction that also meets their cultural needs. In many cases residents fear they will be left homeless.

Many Irish Travellers at Dale Farm have also expressed concern about wider discrimination against their community, and fear they would be unable to find a home that they consider culturally adequate without a negotiated settlement.

“A negotiated settlement is a must and the local authorities should work with those living at Dale Farm towards achieving it. This means genuine consultation, in a manner that seeks meaningful input from Travellers rather than a form-filling exercise, and, if an eviction is unavoidable, ensuring adequate alternative housing which allows the Irish Travellers to express their cultural identity,” Jezerca Tigani said.

Background

Irish Travellers are an ethnic group, originally from Ireland, who are recognized and protected as an ethnic group in English law. Many Irish Travellers live in caravans on unauthorized encampments or on authorized sites. Irish Travellers, along with other Romani, Travellers and Gypsies in the UK, face

widespread discrimination and significant obstacles in getting housing, education and health services.

Dale Farm, which is located on land owned by some Traveller, Romani and Gypsy families is the UK's largest Traveller settlement. Part of Dale Farm was granted permission for residential use. The part of Dale Farm where up to 400 Irish Traveller residents now face forced eviction, however, has repeatedly been denied planning permission for residential use on the basis of local zoning restrictions.