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Roma families in Belgrade face forced eviction by government agency

Twenty seven Roma families in Serbia's capital Belgrade face imminent forced eviction from their homes to make way for new commercial housing built by a government owned company, Amnesty International said today.

On Tuesday, at the request of the Building Directorate of Serbia, families living in the informal settlement Block 61 in the New Belgrade area were given 48 hours to leave their homes.

The families of Block 61 were not consulted about the eviction or offered any alternative accommodation ahead of the approaching harsh Serbian winter. Many of those facing eviction are children.

"Roma families in Belgrade are continuing to be pushed out on to the streets without providing adequate alternative housing. The authorities must end this unacceptable practice," said John Dalhuisen, Amnesty International's Deputy Director for Europe and Central Asia.

"Of particular concern here is that 20 of the families were internally displaced from Kosovo after the 1999 war, and the government is obliged to give them protection and assistance. Instead they have been left in informal settlements without access to basic services.

"The government should be providing social housing for these displaced families who have lived in Serbia without adequate housing for 12 years."

The planned eviction would be the first of Roma in Belgrade to be carried out on behalf of the government rather than the city authorities.

"Amnesty International has repeatedly called on the Serbian government to introduce a law prohibiting forced evictions," said John Dalhuisen. "We are very concerned that the government, instead of preventing evictions, now appears to be complicit in their conduct."

According to an Amnesty International report published in April, the Serbian government has repeatedly failed to prevent the forced eviction by the Belgrade authorities, of Roma families who often lose their livelihoods and their only possessions in addition their homes.

In 2009, the UN's Special Rapporteur on Internally Displaced Persons told the Serbian government to address the human rights situation of internally displaced people and to ensure that forced evictions were carried out in accordance with international standards.

The Roma population in Belgrade has been subject to forced evictions since at least 2000, after Roma displaced from Kosovo sought assistance and shelter but often had no choice but to live in informal settlements.

Forced evictions in Belgrade have increased rapidly since May 2009 when the City of Belgrade introduced its "Action Plan for the Resettlement of Shanty [Unhygienic] Settlements".

Serbia is required under international human rights law to refrain from and protect people from forced evictions.