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Kosovo: Protect the right to health and life

The health of hundreds of Roma, Ashkali and Egyptiani currently living in camps built on a former lead-smelting site in Kosovo is under serious threat. High levels of lead have been registered in the blood of many of the 531 adults and children who have been living in three camps on the site of the former Trepca Mines Company in Zvecan Municipality near Mitrovica since 1999, when they were forced to leave their homes during the Kosovo conflict.

In a letter to the UN Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government (PISG), Amnesty International presses for immediate action to address the continuing serious violation of the right to health of the three minority groups. Failure to act may lead to a violation of the right to life guaranteed under international human rights law.

"The high concentration of lead in the air and soils of the site and high blood lead levels in the local population were well known from studies conducted in the pre-conflict period of 1999. UNMIK has been aware of the threat to the health of the inhabitants of these camps from at least 2000. Yet, nothing has been done to relocate them," Sian Jones, researcher on Serbia and Montenegro (including Kosovo) at Amnesty International, said.

In reports dated July and October 2004, the World Health Organization (WHO) office in Pristina found that almost a third of the children examined had unacceptable levels of lead in their blood: 12 of them were found to have exceptionally high levels. The WHO stated that "...the Roma case is urgent. Children's lives and development potentials are at risk".

Severe lead exposure may lead in adults to increased blood pressure and decreased functions of the kidneys and central nervous system. In children, high level of exposure may lead to convulsions, coma and even death; even lower levels of exposure are associated with decreased intelligence, growth and hearing.

The risk to the health of the inhabitants is ongoing and cumulative. Yet, in the case of lead-poisoning the removal of children from the source can reduce the lead level in their blood by almost as 50 per cent within weeks.

WHO has recommended relocation of the camps.

"As the responsible authorities, UNMIK and the PISG must immediately adopt measures to remove the inhabitants of the camps from danger, and subsequently to address the unacceptable levels of pollution affecting the wider community," Sian Jones said.

"A continuing failure to act will render UNMIK and the PISG in violation of their obligations to respect and protect the right to health in failing to take all necessary measures to safeguard the population within their jurisdiction, or to discharge their core obligations under international treaties incorporated into applicable law in Kosovo."

Amnesty International is aware that within the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptiani communities people are concerned about being resettled yet again without being able to return to their pre-war homes. The organization is also aware that many of them have not been fully informed of the extent of the danger to which they are exposed.

Amnesty International urges UNMIK and the PISG to:

- take immediate action to evacuate the three camps to safe shelters, ensuring the community's participation in the decision-making;
- monitor their health and address the effects of lead poisoning focusing in the first instance on children and pregnant women;
- ensure that the relocation should not compromise the right of the residents of the camps to return ultimately to their pre-war homes;
- ensure that the relocation be carried out in a manner that respects the rights to life, dignity, liberty and security of those affected;
- ensure that after their resettlement the members of the communities are able to enjoy their right to seek freely opportunities for employment.

Amnesty International also urged UNMIK and the PISG to subsequently address the unacceptable levels of pollution affecting the wider community in Zvecan and Mitrovica.

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