

PUBLIC

AI Index: EUR 70/012/2005

04 August 2005

UA 204/05

Health concern

**SERBIA AND MONTENEGRO
(Kosovo)**

**About 530 residents of three displaced persons' camps in
Mitrovica, including 138 children under the age of six**

The health of some 530 residents of displaced persons' camps in the Mitrovica region of northern Kosovo is at risk due to lead pollution from a disused lead-smelting site near the camps. Most of those living in the three camps, including 138 children under the age of six, have dangerous levels of lead in their blood. Some of the children have suffered symptoms of lead poisoning, including convulsions and coma, suggesting very high levels of exposure. According to the UN World Health Organization (WHO), children living at the camps "are at a true risk of encephalopathy [brain disorder] and possible death".

The group, all members of the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian communities, are living in the displaced persons' camps at Cesmin Lug (in Albanian, Cesminlukë), Zitkovac (Zhitkoc) and Kablare. Most have lived at the camps, set up by the UN in 1999, since fleeing their homes from southern Mitrovica following the conflict in Kosovo that same year. The camps are located on land which was used for a lead-smelting plant, operated by the Trepca Mines Company, until the UN forced its closure in 2000.

High concentrations of lead remain in the air and soil around the camps. In adults, exposure to high levels of lead may result in increased blood pressure and decreased function of the kidneys and central nervous system. The health of pregnant women and children is particularly at risk. In children, it may lead to convulsions, coma and even death; even lower levels of exposure are associated with decreased intelligence, growth and hearing. It has been reported that some children living in the camps have lead lines in their teeth, indicating chronic lead exposure, while their growth and development is reportedly far below average for their ages.

On 24 June 2005, the UN Representative of the Secretary-General on the human rights of internally-displaced persons, Professor Doctor Walter Kälin, spoke shortly after a visit to the region about the need for those living at the camp to be evacuated immediately. He said: "This situation is an emergency. 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 reports published in 2004, the WHO recommended that the camps be relocated. On 20 July 2005, in a reply to a letter dated 12 July 2005 sent by the Secretary General of Amnesty International to the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General (SRSG), Søren Jessen-Petersen informed the organisation about recent progress made in the process of relocating those living at the camp. The letter explained that the UN had chosen a site for relocation, but would not begin to relocate the camps before October 2005, "with the most fortuitous conditions." This delay is allegedly due in part to funding shortages.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Since the end of the conflict there in 1999, Kosovo has been administered by UNMIK (UN Interim Mission in Kosovo), headed by the SRSG, who holds executive powers. The Provisional Institutions of Self-Government (PISG), established by the UN and which includes an elected assembly of 120 members, has been responsible since 2002 for the administration of an increasing number of Ministries, including the Ministry of Health.

The lead pollution and high blood lead levels in the local population were well known from earlier epidemiological and environmental studies conducted before 1999, when the three camps were set up by

the UN. UNMIK authorities themselves reported on the pollution in 2000. However, according to information obtained by Amnesty International, many local people have not been fully informed of the extent of the danger to which they are exposed, and of the likely long-term effects on their health.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English or your own language:

- expressing grave concern for the health of the approximately 530 Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian people currently living in the displaced persons' camps at Cesmin Lug (Cesminlukë), Zitkovac (Zhitkoc) and Kablare on site of the former Trepca Mines Company lead-smelting plant;
- expressing particular concern for the health of pregnant women and children living in the camps, including 138 children under the age of six;
- stating that Amnesty International considers that, by failing to remove the population from the site, the UN has violated the right to health of those living in the camps, as guaranteed by Article 12 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Serbia and Montenegro is a state party;
- expressing concern at the slow progress in relocating the residents of the camp, and urging the authorities to take action to immediately evacuate the three camps to safe alternative accommodation;
- ensuring that the transfer should be conducted in accordance with the UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, including by ensuring the community's participation in the decision-making for the relocation and by providing the community with detailed and accurate information of the reasons and procedures for their displacement, and of the health risks to which they are exposed by staying in the camps;
- calling on the authorities to ensure that all necessary medical treatment is provided for those suffering from lead exposure, including those among the local population, and to take measures recommended by the WHO to contain and reverse the lead pollution.

APPEALS TO:

Special Representative of the UN Secretary General

Søren Jessen-Petersen

UNMIK headquarters, Pristina, Kosovo

Fax: + 1 212 963 9877 (please mark faxes "For the attention of Søren Jessen-Petersen, Kosovo")

Email: kangasniemi@un.org (please mark emails "Please forward to Søren Jessen-Petersen")

Salutation: Dear Special Representative

Prime Minister

Bajram Kosumi

Government Building

2nd Floor, Room C202, Mother Teresa Street

Pristina, Kosovo

Fax: + 381 38 211 202

Email: florentina.baraku@ks-gov.net

Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

COPIES TO:

Minister of Health

Sadik Idrizi

3 Zagrebi, 38000 Pristina, Kosovo

Fax: + 381 38 212 233

Email: sadik.idrizi@ks-gov.net

Salutation: Dear Minister of Health

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 15 September 2005.