

The „Osterode“ refugee camp in Kosovo



Unhealthy surroundings for the Roma refugees, who have been contaminated by lead

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For Human Rights. Worldwide.

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Unhealthy surroundings for the Roma refugees, who have been contaminated by lead

In February 2006 the move began of the Roma and Ashkali from the lead-contaminated refugee camps Žitkovac/Zhitkoc and Kablare/Kablari in North-Mitrovica/North-Mitrovic? into the former French military base “Osterode”, which is only 50 metres from the lead works of the “Trepca Mines Company”, which is contaminated by heavy metal.

Since 1999 the “inmates” of the above mentioned refugee camps and of the Cesmin Lug/Cesminluk? refugee camp, 560 members of the Roma and Ashkali, have had to vegetate after being driven out of their houses in the south of Mitrovica/ Mitrovic? by extremist Albanians in the same year during the Kosovo war. Around the camps there is an extremely high concentration of lead and other heavy metals in the ground and in the air, so that the residents of the camps have been exposed for years to a very heavy contamination and suffer from lead poisoning.

In spite of the express demands of the GfbV that the residents of the camps should be moved to an uncontaminated area and that medical treatment should be commenced promptly, by the beginning of September 457 persons, among them 183 children under the age of 15 have been moved to this former military camp of the French KFOR soldiers. The temporary administration of the United Nations in Kosovo (UNMIK), which is responsible for the refugee camps, justified this measure, which is contested from a medical point of view, by stating that by removing the top level of soil and by covering the lower levels with concrete and by better conditions like improved medical treatment, regular provision of food and adequate sanitary facilities the danger to health of the refugees in the Osterode refugee camp would be reduced. So the continuing contamination of the air through heavy metals in camp “Osterode” and the resulting consequences for the health of the contaminated persons are being accepted.

The refugees in “Osterode” have been served since February 2006 by a doctor, a nurse and a small “clinic”. The head of the UNMIK, Joachim Rucker, stated that the medical treatment of the lead poisoning began on 2nd September 2006. For this reason the medical team was increased in size, by a further American doctor, two local paediatricians and an assistant doctor, five nurses and five Roma helpers. It is the children and the pregnant women to whom the doctors devote the most attention. The Society for Threatened Peoples sent one of the leading European specialists for heavy metal poisoning, the environmental doctor, Klaus-Dieter Runow, on a fact finding mission to Kosovo. Dr Runow took blood samples and 66 hair samples. The lead values of the refugees exceeded the reference value by at least 20, in the case of several children the values were 1,200 times the permissible level. Many tests displayed also very high cadmium and arsenic values.

“Therapy and detoxification are not possible on the spot. The refugees can only be helped when the exposure has come to an end. Of course the living conditions are better on the former military base, but what use it that to the refugees if they must continue suffering from heavy metal poisoning?” wrote the environmental doctor, Klaus-Dieter Runow¹ in a letter to the GfbV in connection with the move to camp “Osterode”.

The head of the GfbV team, Paul Polansky, emphasised in a report to the Society for Threatened Peoples of 05.09.2006: “All the doctors who have visited “Osterode” say that this is not a safe place to treat people – particularly children with high lead values.” The recent report of the WHO shows a lead value of over 45 mg/dl in the case of 39 children. To date however only 16 children have been treated. Earlier studies of the WHO from the years 2000, 2004, 2005 and 2006 show in the case of some children lead values of over 70 mg/dl. The New York State Health Department states that children manifesting a lead concentration of this level “must be admitted to hospital immediately” and are not allowed to return to the contaminated area.² The children from “Osterode” with high lead values should really be taken to hospital in Belgrade for treatment. Since however neither the WHO nor the UNMIK see themselves responsible for taking the patients to Belgrade it simply remains to be seen how effective the treatment really is.

For detailed information please refer to the GfbV report on the “Osterode” refugee camp.

NOTES

- 1 See here “Highest level of lead contamination ever registered in human hair” – Under the eyes of the UNMIK: 560 Roma refugees in Kosovo exposed to poisonous heavy metals since 1999.
- 2 www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/lead/handbook/phc5.htm

“OSTERODE” REFUGEE CAMP

The Society for Threatened Peoples (GfbV) has since 1999 been concerned with the situation in the refugee camps for Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) in Kosovo, in which Roma and Ashkali have been living since they were driven out during the Kosovo war. The situation was particularly dangerous in the camps in North Mitrovica/North Mitrovicë: Cesmin Lug/Cesminluk?, Žitkovac/Zhitkoc and Kablare/Kablar. These camps were set up on the site of a lead works operated by the “Trepca Mines Company”.

Since 1999 a team under the leadership of the American journalist and writer Paul Polansky on behalf of the GfbV in Kosovo to investigate the situation of the refugees there and to support the Roma, who were in especial danger. Great concern has been occasioned by the contamination of the camps with heavy metals (among others cadmium, arsenic, quicksilver, antimony and manganese). The GfbV has been trying since 2001 to get the Roma evacuated from these camps to an area which is not contaminated.

The present situation is described below. The information is from the records of the GfbV team unless otherwise stated.

In February 2006 the move of the Roma, Ashkali and “Egyptians” began from the two refugee camps Kablare/Kablar and Žitkovac/Zhitkoc in North-Mitrovica/North-Mitrovicë (Kosovo) on account of the extremely high contamination with heavy metal to a new refuge camp called “Osterode” – aprox. 50 metres from the previous contaminated camps. “Osterode” is a camp to the north of Mitrovica/Mitrovicë, which was previously occupied by the French KFOR soldiers. It was in a short time evacuated by them because of the high degree of contamination with heavy metals. The reason for the move was the extremely high concentration of lead and other heavy metals in the soil, in the water and in the air because on the site were the lead works of the Trepca Mines Company. In the year 2000 the works were closed by the United Nations. In the nearby camp of “Osterode” however, where according to the information provided by our team in Kosovo at present 457 persons, among them 183 children under the age of 15 years, (according to the Special representative of the Secretary General of 04.09.2006 593 persons in 150 households) are living, the toxic concentration of lead and other heavy metals in the soil and in the air is just as high.

Just some 50 metres from the heap contaminated with heavy metal refugee children are playing in a river.

The refugees are allowed to leave the camp at any time of day. Since the opportunities for children to play are singularly unfavourable inside the camp they often go swimming and fishing in the nearby river Ibar/Iber, which according to the head of the GfbV team in Kosovo, Paul Polansky, “is one of the rivers with the highest degree of heavy metal contamination in the whole of Europe”¹. Just near the poisoned river the UN quite irresponsibly built in the year 2000 between the two refugee camps Cesmin Lug/Cesminluk? and Osterode the so-called „Alley of Health“. This path, is open to the public and is frequently used, particularly by joggers. Here we find the “green lung” right in the middle of an area contaminated by heavy metals. One must note here too that the air is not clean either, being contaminated by lead. So sporting activities increase the amount of lead particles taken in by the body.



For the plan of the area together with the exact geographical position please see the appendix.

“The whole area is contaminated. You will find not a spot (around Mitrovica/Mitrovicë?) which is not contaminated,” said Charles Carron-Brown, the manager of Trepca Mines in an interview with the New York Times². So at least the people in the extremely highly contaminated areas around the disposal heaps ought to be evacuated. No wonder then that illnesses have

frequently occurred. Lead poisoning has caused miscarriages, disturbances of growth, bad hearing, comatose conditions, lack of concentration, damage to brain, nerves and kidneys etc. in the refugee camps in North Mitrovica.

For many years now the question has been raised why the transitional administration of the United Nations in Kosovo UNMIK responsible for the refugee camps and the World Health Organisation WHO have taken no action here and why the refugees have been refused the urgently needed medical treatment, i.e. decontamination. Reports were published already in the years 2000, 2004 and 2005 by the WHO, in which clear recommendations were made that the Roma be "moved immediately" from the contaminated refugee camps and out of the area contaminated with heavy metals. The experts were all of one mind that the Roma were being exposed to an extremely high concentration of heavy metal contamination, which is above all carried through the air with the poisonous dust.

Nevertheless no action was taken by the UNMIK or the WHO to protect the people living there from the poisoning or to cure them. It was only when the GfbV and various other NGOs brought pressure to bear and summoned up public opinion to demand the urgent evacuation of the refugees on account of the contamination of the whole area that the UNMIK finally saw itself forced to take action.

However the Society for Threatened Peoples warned against moving the contaminated refugees only a few steps away and still within the area of the poisonous heaps in the former French military base "Osterode" because there are high concentrations of lead and other heavy metals in the soil and in the air. The UNMIK explained the move by saying that the danger to health of the people living in the "Osterode" camp could be reduced by removing the contaminated upper layers of soil and covering up the lower layers with concrete. The belief was expressed that the living conditions of the Roma would be considerably improved by better medical care, regular provision of food and adequate sanitary facilities. As a reaction to the public pressure the WHO acted irresponsibly by reversing its own recommendation of "immediate evacuation" to an uncontaminated area and agreed last year to the plans of the UNMIK. These plans meant moving the refugees just 50 metres away to the site of the present camp "Osterode".

"They told us that there would be less lead, but I don't notice any difference", said a camp resident, Latif Musurica, when he saw that the new refugee camp is only about 50 metres from his present abode.³

In March 2006 the WHO were still saying:

A medicine called DMSA (Dimercaptosuccinic acid)⁴ was not offered by the WHO because (according to Patricia Warings, Director of Civil Administration of the UNMIK) this agency and UNMIK have first to get this medicine approved by the Ministry of Health in Belgrade.

In other words, people would have to die because WHO and UNMIK in Kosovo, which is de facto under international administration, did not want to circumvent a meaningless regulation from a faraway and no longer competent Belgrade. But it was in fact known to both WHO and UNMIK that this medicine is certainly permitted in the western democratic countries. The absurd thing is that the GfbV had itself several months before the beginning of the decontamination treatment of the refugees by the UNMIK and the WHO bought 24 packets of the medicine EDTA and received the permission of the Serb Ministry of Health.

"The WHO will be operating a therapeutic clinic for lead poisoning as soon as the approval of the medicine DMSA has been received from the Ministry of Health in Belgrade⁵." In fact the treatment of the refugees should have commenced in February 2006.

When the Society for Threatened Peoples asked in March 2006 what the position was concerning the permission it received the answer from the WHO: "The treatment will be starting shortly⁶."

According to the information given by Joachim Rucker, the Special Representative of the Secretary General, the first treatment of the refugees in "Osterode" was at last started on 31st August 2006⁷. The Society for Threatened Peoples recalls once more in this connection the statement of the doctor acting on behalf of the WHO, Dr Syla, who said in January last year that "Osterode" was not the right place to treat people suffering from lead poisoning because the contamination of the patients continues there.

Although the WHO receives 1,000,000 dollars from the American office in Pristina for the medical treatment of the refugees the Roma are, according to Polansky, at the present time being treated in the lead contaminated area. The latest reports state that the WHO has discovered in 39 children a

lead value of over 45 mg/dl (reference value in the blood i.e. erythrocytes): < 0.030 ppm; reference value in the hair: < 1,0 µg/g. These values, which are considerably below those discovered by the GfbV in November 2005, are said to be due to better nourishment and hygienic conditions. So the UNMIK makes itself guilty of taking completely inadequate care of this minority for six years, which is till today the subject of racial discrimination and which has been persecuted, driven out and crowded together in refugee camps and of keeping them in quite unacceptable conditions of hygiene. Since the contact of the refugees to the outside has been made extremely difficult, this unbearable situation remained largely hidden from the world.

At present only 16 children are being treated. However the earlier studies of the WHO from the years 2000, 2004, 2005 and 2006 show that some of the Roma children had lead values of more than 70 mg/dl, that they should be admitted to hospital immediately” and that they should not return to the contaminated area⁹. Children with high lead values should be taken from the camp “Osterode” to be treated in Belgrade. It has not so far been decided who should take the sick children to Belgrade. Neither the UNMIK nor the WHO feel themselves responsible.

As can be seen from the bottom photos, “Osterode” is not free from lead.

Information received from Polansky shows that neither the UNMIK nor the WHO does its job properly. The children are still living in the contaminated area, they are still not being treated in accordance with generally accepted medical standards and no realistic attempt is being made to make sure that they have a better future.

PRESENT SITUATION IN THE “OSTERODE” REFUGEE CAMP



Camp Osterode – in the background: toxic slag heaps. Photos: M. Gidzic

There are at present about 114 refugee families living in the refugee camp “Osterode”– all told, 457 persons, of whom 183 are children under the age of 15 (according to information received from the Special Representative of the Secretary General of 04.09.2006 there are 150 households with 593 persons). A further 41 refugee families (196 persons) (according to information from the Special Representative of the Secretary General of 04.09.2006 there are 34 households with 148 persons) still living in the Cesmin Lug/Cesminluk? camp because there is not at present enough accommodation to put up all the refugees. It has therefore been decided to build more huts so that the remaining families can follow. In order to ensure proper medical treatment a small clinic is open every day from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily with a doctor and a nurse in attendance. For the treatment of lead poisoning an American doctor, two local paediatricians and an assistant doctor, five nurses and five Roma helpers are also employed. Priority is given to children and pregnant women.

The refugees also have access to electricity, heating, running water etc. According to Paul Polansky the facilities in the camp are in some respects better than those available to the average citizen in Mitrovica/Mitrovic? because the camp has its own generators. However black-outs do sometimes occur owing to the faulty use of the machines and the out-dated equipment. As an example the heating system was out of order for several weeks last winter with the result that many children fell ill

and had to be admitted to hospital. Food is financed by the UNMIK at 27,000 Euros per month and organised by the official carers of the camp, the Norwegian Church Aid. Food is purchased at the local shops. Polansky reports that the question is to be raised whether these shops import the food from abroad or whether they buy from local farmers. In the case of the latter food such as fruit and vegetables will also be contaminated. So far as work is concerned, the Roma can find casual jobs in North Mitrovica/North Mitrovic?. Clothing and shoes are provided by the United Nations Children's Fund, UNICEF, and the NGO Care.

The camp is still guarded by the Albanian Security Force, which was engaged by the UNMIK. Incomprehensible is the fact that there are no Roma in the security force. All non-Roma need a special permit, which is issued by the UNMIK, to visit the camp.

The problems of lead poisoning and the high degree of heavy metal contamination of the residents of the camp cast a shadow over the complete life situation of the Roma and Ashkali. What is to become of the refugees after possible treatment has not been settled. There is in addition the uncertain future waiting for them if the country becomes independent.

In the following some of the problems are listed, as seen at the present time, which are likely to arise for the refugees.

TREATMENT OF LEAD POISONING

The treatment of patients with a lead value of over 70 mg/dl is to be conducted with infusions of EDTA (calcium edetate sodium). The patients will have to be brought to Belgrade for treatment. It has not yet been decided, as was stated above, who is to bring the patients to Belgrade.

Those with a lead value of over 45 mg/dl will be treated with DMSA (Dimercaptosuccinic acid) tablets (information provided by the WHO)⁹.

For treatment with DMSA and DMPS the environmental doctor, Klaus-Dietrich Runow, emphasised to the Society for Threatened Peoples on 13th September 2006 the following:

“It is in fact possible to carry out metal detoxification using these substances – but decontamination of the brain is however very difficult because they do not pass the blood-brain barrier. There is also the danger with persons who are highly contaminated that the poisons will become mobilised too fast and that the kidneys and liver will be affected. Another substance, which is favoured by naturopaths in detoxification, is EDTA. Prof. William J. Rea of Dallas/Texas reported of a fatal incident involving an autistic child in a naturopathic practice using EDTA. ...A treatment which can be recommended is the Hepar-Tox Decontamination Programme, which uses only natural substances produced by the body, such as Glutathion and Alpha-Lipon Acid, through infusions. The therapy should be accompanied by an oral food therapy. This means apart from vitamins the intake of minerals and trace elements like selenium.¹⁰”

To ensure the optimal conditions for recovery and treatment it is on the one hand necessary that the patients should be moved to a place which is at a considerable distance and not contaminated. On the other there is no sense in allowing the cured patient to go back once more into the contaminated area. This was emphasised in a letter from the environmental doctor, Klaus-Dietrich Runow to the GfbV¹¹:

“From an environmental point of view the move to the former KFOR camp “Osterode” is highly problematical. My investigations show that the Roma refugees are highly contaminated. To save them the move must be to a place which is at a considerable distance. It is not sufficient to concrete over the soil which is contaminated with lead, for the contact with the poisonous heavy metal still comes through the air. I have visited the former KFOR camp myself and seen the mounds of toxic soil in the immediate vicinity of “Osterode”, which contaminate not only the soil but also the air. Therapy and detoxification are not possible at a place as contaminated as this. These refugees can only be cured if they are moved from this poisoned area. Of course the living conditions are better on the former military base, but what advantage is that to the refugees if they must continue to suffer from heavy metal poisoning? “ See the dossier and photo-documentation of the Society for Threatened Peoples on the family of Shaban Mustafa/Father Shaban and 7 children from the refugee camp Žitkovac/Zhitkoc/, which was detoxified at the Institute for Functional Medicine and Environmental Medicine (IFU) in Bad Emstal in April-August 2006)

As only 24 dwellings have been rebuilt in Roma Mahala¹², more than 100 families must go back after treatment to the camp “Osterode”. On top of that, there are no doctors in Kosovo trained to treat with

DMSA. For this reason the WHO is looking in Belgrade for Serb doctors who can provide the refugees with medical treatment.

THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE OF KOSOVO

It is according to Paul Polansky “the fear of all Roma in the camp () that “Osterode” will remain in future their permanent home and that when the UNMIK leaves the country no one will be concerned with them any longer. No one will be keeping an eye on the complicated and dangerous situation, no one will be concerned with the provision of food and medicine.” There is also by no means any easy answer to the question as to the success of the Roma Mahala Project lying to the south of Mitrovica/Mitrovic?. When will the reconstruction be completed? What will the situation be after independence? Who will get a dwelling in Roma Mahala?

All these questions also lead to quarrels between the families in the refugee camp “Osterode” concerning who goes and who stays behind, who gets a dwelling and who doesn’t. “The families with whom we spoke do not intend to live in the dwellings if they are allocated one. No one wants to live in the south of Mitrovica/Mitrovic?. Everyone is afraid that they will be attacked again by their Albanian neighbours.” (Paul Polansky)

THE ONGOING PROJECT IN KOSOVO – ROMA MAHALA

In the Kosovo war the town of Kosovska Mitrovica/Mitrovic? was “ethnically cleansed” and divided into a southern part almost completely Albanian (approx. 60,000 inhabitants) and a northern part almost completely Serb (approx. 13,000 inhabitants). The two parts of the town are linked by a bridge over the River Ibar/Iber, which is guarded by the police force of the UNMIK and the Kosovo police (KPS). In the northern part there are many Serb refugees living, among them also members of the Roma and Ashkali minorities, who have lost all their belongings in the southern part (Roma Mahala) and who cannot return to this part of the town which is under Albanian administration. Mitrovica/Mitrovic? is not an enclave, the northern part of Kosovo borders on Serbia. In the spring there were Albanian attacks on the Serbs. The UNMIK refused to term these attacks ethnically motivated and viewed them as robberies and small crime. After these attacks not only was the presence of the UNMIK police force increased in North Mitrovica/North Mitrovic?, but the Kosovo team of the GfbV corroborated the return of the “bridge-watchers” to North Mitrovica/North Mitrovic?. Serb advisers and Serb policemen have also been infiltrated, reported Polansky. The lack of security and freedom of movement, not only in North Mitrovica/North Mitrovic?, but also the tensions between the ethnic groups like the contrary views of Pristina and Belgrade on the future of the country are a clear indication of the fact that the situation in Kosovo is still much too dangerous.

The members of the minority groups Roma, Ashkali and “Egyptians” live not only in the north, but also in the Serb enclaves in Central Kosovo like in prison, without any perspective.

The projected reconstruction of the Roma Mahala in the South of Mitrovica/ Mitrovic? is hailed as the largest urban reconstruction project inside Kosovo. Two project groups were founded especially for this purpose – one for the move of the Roma to the camp “Osterode” and one for the reconstruction of Roma Mahala.

At present two tenement houses, each with 24 flats, are being built. Donations for this purpose are being made by the contingent Reconstruction Fund of the SRSG (Special Representative of the Secretary General) and by the Fond of the PISG (Provisional Institutions of Self-Government). The building work is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2006. Two further tenement houses are due to be built, financed by the Norwegian government and scheduled to be completed by the spring of 2007. The Danish Refugee Council (DRC) is also involved in the project “Reconstruction of Roma Mahala”. The DRC is the active partner for the period July to November 2006 for altogether 57 households in Roma Mahala. The project is financed by the total sum of 2 million euros, of which the EAR (European Agency for Reconstruction) and the Swedish government each pay part of the cost. 57 families from Serbia, Montenegro and the province of Vojvodina signed the project and will take part in the reconstruction of their flats.

DEMANDS OF THE SOCIETY FOR THREATENED PEOPLES

- The camp inhabitants must be moved to an uncontaminated area and treated medically there.
- In a safe distance to the contaminated area around North Mitrovica/North Mitrovic? an environmental treatment centre must be set up. Up to date findings of environmental medicine must be respected and not just standard medicine practised. The doctors in charge of treatment must have certificates from the International Board of Environmental Medicine. This centre must of course be open to all citizens of the Mitrovica/ Mitrovic? region.
- Two thirds of the security forces employed in the Roma estates, quarters or refugee camps shall be recruited from out of the Roma population.

MAP OF THE CAMP AND THE SOURROUNDING



NOTES

- 1 E-Mail from the head of the GfbV team in Kosovo, Paul Polansky, to the GfbV of 24.08.2006
- 2 Article “Displaced Gypsies at Risk > From Lead in Kosovo Camps“, Mitrovica, 05.02.2006, Nicolas Wood, New York Times
- 3 Article “Displaced Gypsies at Risk > From Lead in Kosovo Camps“, Mitrovica, 05.02.2006, Nicolas Wood, New York Times
- 4 DMSA is a producer of chelat, which has been approved by the FDA for the detoxification of lead in children. This oral chelat producer, also called Bernstein acid, is able to penetrate the blood-brain barrier and thus detoxifies brain cells.”
(information of the Micro Trace Minerals GmbH)
Source: [http://www.microtrace.de/html_deutsch/Labordiagnostik.htm#Urin-Mineralstoff-%20und%20Schwermetalluntersuchung%20vor%20und%20nach%20DMSA%20Ausleitung%20\(2%20Tests\)](http://www.microtrace.de/html_deutsch/Labordiagnostik.htm#Urin-Mineralstoff-%20und%20Schwermetalluntersuchung%20vor%20und%20nach%20DMSA%20Ausleitung%20(2%20Tests))
- 5 Letter from the UNMIK (Patricia Waring, 18.07.2006) to the GfbV
- 6 E-Mail from the WHO (Julien Bibeau, 16.08.2006)
- 7 SRSG – Press release of 04.09.2006 „SRSG Welcomes Start of Lead-Toxicity Treatment of IDPs in Camp Osterode“
- 8 www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/lead/handbook/phc5.htm
- 9 Source: E-Mail from the head of the GfbV-Team in Kosovo, Paul Polansky, to the GfbV Göttingen of 08.09.2006; meeting on 05.09.2006 of Miradija Gidzic (employee of the GfbV team in Kosovo), Dr. Sylva (Albanian doctor working for the WHO in Pristina) and Gerry Mc Weeney (head of the WHO in Pristina/ Mitrovica)
- 10 for further information: „Nervenschutz durch Entgiftung“ by Klaus-Dietrich Runow, ISBN 3-86516-504-4, Printed in Germany 2005
- 11 Klaus-Dietrich Runow visited on behalf of the GfbV in November 2005 the refugee camps in Kosovo taking 66 hair and blood tests of children and adults. See here: “Highest level of lead contamination ever registered in human hair” – Under the eyes of the UNMIK: 560 Roma refugees in Kosovo exposed to poisonous heavy metals since 1999.
- 12 Roma Mahala was in 1999 the home of approx. 8000 Aschkali, Roma and “Egyptians“. Many of them are refugees and living today in “Osterode“.