

UNMIK/PR/1486

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## UNMIK, WHO and UNICEF renew call for immediate temporary relocation of Roma IDPs as an emergency health requirement

PRISTINA – UNMIK, WHO and UNICEF once again urge the Roma, Ashkaeli and Egyptian (RAE) IDPs to vacate the lead polluted camps in northern Mitrovicë/Mitrovica and Zvečan/Zveçan and move their families to the safer environment offered by UNMIK at Osterode Camp. This is an emergency requirement for the health safety of the IDPs and particularly their children.

Lead is highly toxic to humans. Young children, especially those under 5 years of age and foetuses, are the most vulnerable. Exposure to lead causes a variety of adverse health effects, including impaired mental and physical development. Although a number of measures are being undertaken at the existing camps, given their high pollution levels, no amount of remediation on these sites can protect the residents from serious health consequences. The only solution is for the IDPs to relocate to a safer location immediately.

Recent blood tests by WHO confirm that many children in Cesmin Lug, Kablar and Žitkovac/Zhikoc camps have exceedingly high blood lead levels. The lead can be removed from their blood by chelation therapy. However, this treatment requires that the patients be moved to a lead-safer environment for convalescence. Returning to a contaminated environment after chelation therapy would place those treated at still greater risk.

Camp Osterode, that can accommodate up to 120 families (approx. 550 individuals), was cleaned and refurbished by UNMIK in line with the recommendations of a team of US environmental engineers who had tested the site for lead contamination. WHO again tested the camp after remediation and concluded that the camp is considerably safer from a lead stand point than the current camps.

At Osterode, the housing units have been completely renovated and most are centrally heated. Arrangements are in place for continuous electricity and water supply. Garbage will be regularly collected and the camp washed down on a weekly basis. The Camp has a large community centre for the IDPs, a kindergarten and playground, a women's centre, and a medical facility. There will be a doctor and two nurses on duty, as well as professional camp managers. Food supplements will continue to be provided to the IDPs here. Appropriate security arrangements will be made in consultation with the IDPs.

Most importantly, Osterode will be a safer place for the IDPs to live as we and they finalize plans to return to their former homes in the Roma Mahala or elsewhere. Here they can be properly treated for heavy metal pollution and given a chance to have a healthier life. This is only a temporary measure, a stepping stone to the permanent return of the IDPs to their homes. Whereas work on reconstruction of the Roma Mahala will be vigorously pursued, the emergency health situation must be addressed without any further delay.

UNMIK, WHO and UNICEF appeal to IDPs, local authorities and community leaders to act in the best interests of their children and to move immediately from the polluted and unhygienic camps into the new facility.