



COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
COMMISSAIRE AUX DROITS DE L'HOMME



Ref: CommHR/RK/sf 016-2009

Ambassador Lamberto ZANNIER

Special Representative of the
UN Secretary General
UNMIK
Pristina

Strasbourg, 6 April 2009

Dear Ambassador,

I would like to thank you very much for the help and co-operation of UNMIK during my visit last week, in particular the loan of an UNMIK car and driver, which proved invaluable particularly in north Mitrovica. I also had a very informative meeting with representatives of your institution, Mr. Anil Vasisht, Mr. Ernst Tschoepke, Mr. Amit Singhal, and Mr. Alexander Ivanko.

I would like to take this opportunity to follow-up with you directly on the serious question of the Roma, Ashkali and Egyptian families who are living in the Cesmin Lug and Osterode camps in north Mitrovica. As you know, I visited both camps myself accompanied by staff from the UNHCR and the Kosovo Agency for Advocacy and Development (KAAD), the local NGO which is now running Osterode. During my meeting with civil society in Pristina, I also met with representatives from Norwegian Church Aid, who have been very involved with the camps.

I have read a great deal about the camps before my visit by way of preparation, and was equally presented with much information during my stay. Almost ten years after the war, the camps which had been set up to provide a temporary shelter to the inhabitants of the Roma Mahala following their expulsion, are still hosting some 480 people, divided between the old Cesmin Lug camp and the refurbished Osterode camp, where some families had been relocated on a temporary basis in 2006. This was only a temporary measure, a stepping stone to the permanent return of the IDPs to their homes.

When visiting these camps, one is struck both by the very poor conditions in which these families live, and the extremely serious health hazards which they face on a daily basis by simple virtue of the fact that they are living in a lead-contaminated area. The children I saw were clearly under-developed for their age.

The severe and possibly irreversible health risks of those living in the camps have been known about for almost a decade. In November 2000 the UNMIK report "First Phase of Public Health Project on Lead Pollution in Mitrovica Region" recommended that the Roma camps be relocated and that their residents receive continuous education and support for the eradication of lead poisoning. Since July 2004, the WHO has categorized the lead intoxication in the camps as a severe health crisis. Against the background of these facts it is no exaggeration to qualify the situation in the camps of Cesmin Lug and Osterode as a humanitarian disaster calling for an immediate and determined response.

The severity of the situation calls for two immediate steps: the remaining residents of both camps must be evacuated without delay and provided appropriate medical treatment. The next step is to find permanent and safe housing for these families. While the political issues of land allocation remain, we are only dealing with roughly 140 families or approximately 500 individuals, and it appears that money could, and must, resolve this problem.

While I understand that many actors have been involved in the past, it is my strong belief that UNMIK, as the leading international organisation with authority in the north of Kosovo, must take responsibility under UN Security Council Resolution 1244 to ensure that this medical emergency is not ignored and that a solution is found without delay.

I therefore call on UNMIK to organise an immediate evacuation of the families in these two camps to a non-toxic site, followed by medical treatment. This is the least we can do to ensure healthy lives for this European community.

Ambassador, if I can be of any further help or support in finding an immediate solution to this problem, please do let me know. I intend to make a presentation of my findings of my camp visits to the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers on 22 April 2009, where I will show a short video film of my visit.

Yours sincerely,

Thomas Hammarberg