



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
December 6, 2005

Contact:
Paula Palmer, 303-444-0306 ext 103
paula@globalresponse.org
See: www.globalresponse.org

Global Response launches campaign to rescue “Gypsy” children from lead-contaminated camps in Kosovo

In northern Kosovo, 500 people live in camps maintained by the United Nations, where they are continually exposed to severe lead poisoning. Five years ago, Bernard Kouchner, a physician and the first Special Representative for the UN Secretary-General in Kosovo, said it would be negligent to keep children and pregnant women in the camps “*even for one more day.*”

The most recent (2005) World Health Organization study in these camps found that 88 percent of children under age 6 had blood lead levels in the highest category, described as “acute medical emergency.”

Even the lowest measured blood lead level was three times higher than the permissible level for children (10 ug/dL). Health impacts of lead poisoning in children are irreversible. They include brain damage, mental retardation, behavior problems, anemia, liver and kidney damage, hearing loss and death. Blood lead levels in the Kosovo children may have already lowered their IQs by 20 points or more. At least one child’s death is attributed to lead poisoning; there may be many others.

In 1999 the UN established the camps for Internally Displaced Persons near the Trepca mine and smelter, known for producing both valuable metals and high volumes of lead-contaminated waste. Experts (then and now) urged immediate evacuation of the children and pregnant women, who are most vulnerable to lead poisoning.

In 2004, WHO found soil contamination in the camps “above safe levels for gardening, children playing and human habitation,” and urged that the population be removed from the camps on an emergency basis. In 2005, a WHO expert described the camps as “*one of the most serious lead-related environmental health disasters in the world and in history.*” The International Committee of the Red Cross also demanded that the camps be evacuated.

more

“Let’s call this injustice by its name -- environmental racism -- and demand that the United Nations immediately relocate the Roma victims and provide the medical care they need,” says Paula Palmer, Executive Director of Global Response, a Boulder-based organization that organizes letter-writing

campaigns to help communities prevent many kinds of environmental destruction. “Why has the United Nations taken no action based on these reports and demands? Why are 500 people still living on lead-contaminated soils and breathing lead-contaminated dust from huge tailings piles?”

The European Roma Rights Centre says there is only one explanation for keeping 500 people on these huge contaminated tailings piles: racism. The displaced persons at the Kablare, Zitkovac and Cesmin Lug camps are Roma—an ethnic group commonly called “Gypsies.”

Since the 12th century, when the Romani people migrated eastward from India to Europe, they have been met everywhere with mistrust, rejection, persecution, banishment, enslavement and attempted extermination. A third of Europe’s Roma population was murdered in the Holocaust, but that is not the most recent pogrom against them. In 1999, when NATO action against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia ended, ethnic Albanians returned from abroad and violently expelled approximately four-fifths of Kosovo’s resident Romani population. Romani people were kidnapped, abused, murdered and raped. Whole Romani settlements were burned to the ground, and NATO forces did not interfere to stop this “ethnic cleansing.”

Palmer says that racist sentiment against the Roma is so pervasive that the UN has been able to keep the Roma in lead-contaminated camps for six years without risking a huge public outcry. “It is time now for that outcry to come from every corner of the globe.”

Global Response is urging citizens from all around the world to write letters to United Nations officials demanding immediate action to evacuate the lead-contaminated camps in Kosovo and to provide safe housing and health care to the affected Romani people. For more information visit www.globalresponse.org

Environmental Racism -- **Environmental racism** is the unequal protection against toxic and hazardous waste exposure and the systematic exclusion of people of color from environmental decisions affecting their communities (including urban planning and zoning, and natural resource extractive activities). The movement for **environmental justice** has emerged in the last 30 years to articulate a vision of a society in which no community is unfairly burdened with pollution or other environmental harms and where social justice and ecological sustainability prevail.

The Roma – In spite of the relentless discrimination they have experienced, the Roma of Central and Eastern Europe maintain rich and diverse cultural, legal, and economic traditions. For example: Roma in many countries enforce their own bodies of law based on oral traditions; they have been considered the best metal workers in many European countries for centuries; and they have had a major influence on literature, theater, and music and other art forms in throughout Europe and Russia. In the post-Soviet Union era in Eastern Europe, economic instability that comes with free markets breeds resentment against Roma whenever people’s financial fortunes take a turn for the worst. Fortunately, during the last three decades there has been a resurgence in Romani civil society organizations that are demanding recognition of the Romani people’s contributions to the world, acknowledgement of their distinct ethnic heritage, and human rights protections. At the 1971 First World Romani Congress, the wheel-shaped 16-spoked *chakra* was adopted as the international Romani symbol.