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December 11, 2008

Death camps

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New Internationalist

‘There is no acceptable lead level for children,’ announced the World Health Organization in response to the recent recall of millions of lead-painted toys made in China by Mattel, America’s largest toy manufacturer. Yet the world’s worst case of lead poisoning of children – still ongoing after nine years in two UN refugee camps in northern Kosovo – has been ignored by both the media and the UN itself.

Three camps were built in November 1999 in Mitrovica to house about 500 Roma refugees whose homes had been looted and then destroyed after the war by extremist Albanians returning from exile. When concerns were raised that the camps were being built on toxic wasteland, the UN promised that they would only be used for 45 days, until new homes could be found. If homes could not be found, the UN said, it would take the Roma abroad to be resettled.

Nine years later the refugees are still living on the toxic wasteland. Since 2004 blood tests have shown that the levels of lead in several of the children in the camps were the highest recorded in medical history. To date 77 Roma have died in the camps. Many of them are small children, who are amongst the most vulnerable to lead poisoning because their immune systems are not yet fully developed. More than 50 Roma women have also suffered miscarriages because of lead poisoning.

Dr Klaus Runow, Germany’s leading expert on heavy metal poisoning, visited the camps in 2006 and took hair samples from 66 children there. He sent the hair samples to a well-known US laboratory in Chicago. Tests on the hair showed that the children were not only suffering from fatal levels of lead poisoning but that they also had dangerously high levels of 36 other toxic elements.

Later that year the UN finally decided to close two of the camps, but then only moved the refugees to another camp – called Osterode – just 50 metres away. Several months earlier the French Army had abandoned this military camp after their doctors had warned all soldiers serving there not to father a child for nine months because of the high lead levels in their blood.

German newspaper Bild arranged for a family of eight to be taken from one of the camps to Germany for treatment. Medical tests there showed all were suffering organ and brain damage from lead poisoning. Doctors revealed that one of the children, seven-year-old Denis, had the liver of a 50-year-old alcoholic and would probably die prematurely.

Although the UN does not deny that an entire generation of Roma children living in these camps could face brain damage and premature death, it still refuses to evacuate the 500 refugees to a lead-free area and to provide them with proper medical

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treatment. The UN says the only solution is to build homes for these refugees away from the source of poisoning. But most agree this will still take several years.

The CEO of Mattel would probably be charged with offences carrying a life sentence if American children had such high toxicity levels in their blood after playing with one of Mattel's lead-painted toys. But in UN-administered Kosovo, officials are not even questioned.