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Estonian Green Movement–FoE

Georgia:

Green Alternative

Hungary:

Nature Protection Club of
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National Society of
Conservationists–FoE (NSC)

Lithuania:

Atgaja

Macedonia:

Eko–svest

Poland:

Polish Green Network (PGN)
Institute of Environmental
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Russia:

Sakhalin Environment Watch

Slovakia:

Friends of the Earth – Center
for Environmental Public
Advocacy (FoE–CEPA)

Ukraine:

National Ecological Centre of
Ukraine (NECU)

CEE Bankwatch Network's
Mission is to prevent
environmentally and socially
harmful impacts of
international development
finance, and to promote
alternative solutions and public
participation.

Subotica

28 September 2009

To: Mr. Sven Hegelund, Director EBRD

E-mail: SwedenOffice@ebrd.com

Subject: Letter to EBRD Directors on resettlement of Gazela Bridge
informal settlement

Dear Mr. Sven Hegelund,

On 31 August 114 families from the Gazela slum were moved into shipping containers in five different locations outside of Belgrade. Another 64 families were transported under police escort to their towns of origin throughout Serbia. Two families did not agree to accept the proposed locations, so they were evicted and are still homeless.

The Resettlement Action Plan (RAP) that apparently the Belgrade City Council approved at the start of 2009, is still not public. It has not been approved by the City Assembly. It has not been consulted with the resettled community, the host communities or other parties that have declared interest, such as CEKOR.

I am writing to inform you of the results of a site visit to the new settlements we carried out on 14–17th September and to raise some key issues and questions which we would like to raise with the EBRD.

Further to this, you may be aware that I attended a meeting on Wednesday 23rd September with Ms Hildegard Gacek at the Belgrade office where we exchanged information on the current situation with the resettlement of the project affected people from the Gazela settlement.

I am heartened to hear that the EBRD's consultant has been visiting the settlements and that some of the most immediately pressing issues regarding the physical conditions of the resettlement are being addressed. However we would still like to raise the following issues:

1) Two families have been left homeless and are excluded from any social assistance.

Mr Branko Kalanjios and Mrs Maja Ferizovic's families had been living in the Gazela settlement since its establishment. They did not accept the offer of a shipping container outside of Belgrade as their children were going to school in Novi Beograd, and Mr Kalanjios needs to be inside the city in order to carry out his work collecting waste. It is ironic that these two families were and still are among the most integrated in terms of schooling of children etc. and yet they have been left significantly worse off by the resettlement. Mr Branko Kalanjios was also one of the representatives of the community in interaction with the city authorities regarding the resettlement. They are now staying with friends and relatives in another slum in Novi Beograd and awaiting news on whether they are to be resettled.

At least 18 families were originally of the same opinion as these two families, however the rest signed agreements for resettlement under pressure from the city authorities, who made it clear that they could "take or leave" the locations outside of Belgrade but that they would not be offered anything else, despite their reasonable and fully justified reasons for refusal. This kind of behaviour was not widespread among lower level officials, but was reportedly characteristic of high-ranking city authorities, for example the co-ordinator for resettlement, when they communicated with the group.

2) The resettlement locations for those families who have been resettled appear to be temporary and are unsuitable, with no established economic activity.

The families have been resettled in four different locations outside of Belgrade, however what little income the Gazela residents had was dependent on living in the city where waste collection and other informal activities were possible.

All families in all settlements are now fully dependent on state welfare. Collecting waste is prohibited in newly established settlements, and would anyway be difficult so far from the city. Ideas about incorporating at least some of Gazela dwellers in municipal companies or training them for other employment have never materialised.

Many of the resettled population now have to travel to Belgrade to carry out their activities, and have already established places where they leave their trailers for waste collection in Novi Beograd. A significant number have also established “sleep over” arrangements with families living in other slums in Novi Beograd because of the high cost of travel from the new locations to the city. It costs on average 3–6 EUR to get from the settlements to Belgrade and back, which the residents cannot afford, therefore they sleep over with friends and relatives for two or three days and then travel back. This will be a destructive factor for families and raising children if it becomes a regular arrangement.

We have recently heard that there is an intention expressed by city officials of creating a recycling company, possibly equidistant from the new settlements. This raises the question of whether the city of Belgrade believes that the new sites are permanent rather than temporary. This is a matter which needs to be clarified immediately.

3) The sanitary conditions, health care, and educational situation are highly unsuitable.

Malnutrition is present in all settlements because of decreased earnings from waste collection, the low quality of food provided by social services once a day, and a lack of stoves for cooking and heating. The containers do not have chimneys and it is forbidden to customise them, so it is planned to provide electric heaters but these have not materialised yet.

Each settlement has shared sanitary containers, however in all settlements the number is insufficient. Water is provided but **the water in the Mladenovac settlement is unsuitable for drinking**. Dirty clothes are forbidden in the containers, but there are no additional storage facilities for families to keep them. There are no laundry facilities.

Informal enquiries have shown that many families do not feel able to send their children to school, however this is still one of the areas in which most care has been taken, with great efforts by Roma assistants and some organized transport of the children to and from school (although there are already problems with its reliability and timing).

Health clinics are far from all the settlements and people have difficulties in obtaining emergency health care services due to transport problems and lack of identity cards. In Barajevo for example the closest clinic is 8 km from the settlement and public transport is rare and unaffordable.

4) New ghettos have been formed

There are fences around all the settlements, giving a clear sign of being separated from the neighbours. In at least three of the settlements there have been problems with the host communities. Eg. In Barajevo, the host community has made it clear that they are not welcome eg. in the local shop. People are afraid to walk outside the settlement after nightfall.

The settlements have their “representatives”, who attempt to stifle the residents' right to communicate with media or NGOs without their prior consent. People have expressed their fear of being expelled if they express their real problems.

5) The affected people have still not been consulted about the Resettlement Action Plan and do not know whether there are plans for permanent resettlement

There is some confusion around the EBRD's approach to the acceptability of the resettlement. As you wrote in your letter, the plan has still not been approved by Belgrade City Assembly and the EBRD has still not received the final version. Yet on 22nd September it was widely reported in the Serbian media that the EBRD will take a decision in October on whether the Belgrade city authorities have fulfilled its requirements in terms of producing an acceptable Resettlement Action Plan. More alarmingly Mr Thomas Maier was quoted as saying “The City has successfully done its work and fulfilled our expectations” and stating that the remaining uncertainties would be resolved during the coming days.

It should also be noted that the people who were resettled signed agreements with the City of Belgrade, without having an opportunity to read through them first. They did not receive copies of the agreement. For example Branko Kalanjos's group was ordered to meet with the co-ordinator for resettlement from the Belgrade Secretariat for Social Affairs one evening and were given just 30 seconds to think over the locations offered. They were told to accept the locations or be on the street.

Conclusion

The resettlement of the Gazela families to five locations in the periphery of Belgrade was done without an adequate RAP and without the necessary provisions for: health, safety and well-being conditions, employment, schooling and inclusion in the host communities. The measures that are currently being taken to address the immediate pressing issues can bring only limited improvements.

The more fundamental concerns relate to the sustainability of the resettlement, as it is not even clear to the resettled families if this is a temporary solution or a permanent one. Some of the proposed long-term solutions, e.g. establishing a recycling centre equidistant from the new settlements, suggest that the City of Belgrade regards this housing as final.

Recommendations

The EBRD is requested to make public the RAP that it received from Belgrade City Council and to ensure that the resettled families, as well as other interested public, will be informed and consulted about the long-term solutions to the problems with housing, employment, schooling and integration.

The EBRD is recommended to continue to use its leverage in ensuring that the best available practices will be applied to the resettlement of the Gazela families. We view the resettlement as an on-going process, not as the act of physical moving of the slum community. From this point of view we still hope that the necessary steps will be taken by the Belgrade City authorities, as well as by the responsible state authorities, to do right by the Gazela families. We trust that the EBRD will use all the means available to bring forward a solution that is appropriate and sustainable.

Thank you very much for your time. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Yours sincerely,

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