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Press Release

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Roma leaders called on for emergency relocation of IDPs to Camp Osterode

PRISTINA – Camp Osterode in Northern Mitrovica/Mitrovicë is now ready for temporary relocation of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) of the Roma-Ashkali-Egyptian (RAE) communities currently living in the camps of Žitkovac/Zitkovc, Kablare/Kablar and Cesmin Lug/Llugë. This is a major milestone in efforts by UNMIK and its partners to solve the problems linked to the Roma Mahala, as it gives the IDPs an adequate temporary home.

The camp will open Monday 9 January 2006 to receive the RAE IDPs who were invited to be housed here temporarily until the ongoing reconstruction of their permanent homes in the Mitrovica/Mitrovicë Roma Mahala is completed. For those who do not originate from the Mahala, durable solutions are also currently being pursued.

In a meeting in Camp Osterode today, representatives of UNMIK, WHO, UNICEF, UNHCR and NGOs working in the camps, including Norwegian Church Aid and Balkan Sunflowers, called on leaders of the three Roma camps for immediate relocation to safer housing at Osterode and better living conditions.

Camp Osterode, recently vacated by the French KFOR, has been refurbished for lead-safer environment with generous contributions from several international donors. The Camp offers access to health and hygiene infrastructure, social supports, children's programmes as well as employment and training opportunities for the IDPs who can be temporarily housed there. Following soil tests conducted by independent experts, Osterode was made lead-safe with minimal remediation and a regular cleaning regime has been set in place. Comprehensive risk management efforts will be implemented rigorously by the Camp management team in collaboration with the IDP community to reduce levels of lead exposure according to the WHO recommendations, especially to protect children and pregnant women from lead poisoning.

In today's meeting, WHO representatives presented Roma camp leaders with results of recent blood tests on samples taken from children both at the existing three Roma camps and those living in the vicinity of Camp Osterode. After recent testing, WHO has concluded that whereas the blood lead levels of children in the existing camps, particularly Žitkovac/Zitkovc, is at a critical level, the blood lead levels of children living in the vicinity of Camp Osterode is considerably lower and consistent with the overall ambient air quality.

For several months now, health services at the three Roma camps have been reinforced. However, given the high lead contamination in the camps, experts are of the view that serious health consequences for the residents cannot be remedied through on-site medical interventions. Accordingly, in the meeting today, the attending Roma leaders were offered support from UNMIK and partner agencies for emergency

relocation of the IDPs to the safer environs of Osterode where remedial measures would be continued more effectively. Particularly, it was noted, medical treatment for lead toxicity cannot be begun with any person who would return after treatment to the existing camps. Camp Osterode, on the other hand, is a safe environment after treatment.

Camp Osterode is an interim facility developed to house some 560 individuals from 125 families currently living in the camps of Žitkovac/Zitkovc, Kablare/Kablar and Cesmin Lug/Llugë. Most of the IDPs are displaced from the Roma Mahala that was destroyed during the conflict in 1999. Reconstruction of the Roma Mahala has started, with the first phase of rubble clearing completed and work on the first two buildings slated to commence with the onset of the construction season this year.