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DALE FARM TRAVELLERS WIN KEY CONCESSION AS EVICTION DEADLINE APPROACHES

December 11, 2007, Dale Farm, UK and Washington, DC: In a development that could have major implications for the growing international campaign against evictions, the Basildon Council in southeast England appears to be softening its position on the Travellers at the Dale Farm site.

After three years of intimidation and threats against the Travellers, the Council has let it be known that their rights will be considered before any attempt is made to evict them. The shift is reflected in documents submitted to Keith Lomax, the Travellers' lawyer, in advance of a key meeting of the Council's planning committee this Thursday.

The development has brought a glimmer of hope to Traveller advocates, who have appealed to the British Red Cross for humanitarian support in the event of a mass eviction, and are even talking to NGOs about setting up a Tent City for displaced families.

Thursday's meeting will review a decision by the Council to spend £3 million (\$6 million) to evict 86 Traveller families (more than 500 people) because they live on Green Belt land, which is protected from development. The meeting will also outline the Council's argument before the British High Court, which will review the Dale Farm controversy starting February 11, 2008.

The Dale Farm confrontation has come to symbolize Britain's inability to integrate Travellers and Gypsies into society, and also served as a litmus test of the larger crisis of housing that afflicts Roma throughout Europe.

Mr Lomax today welcomed the prospect of a less confrontational position by the Basildon Council. "They appear to be waking up to some of their duties that they have previously ignored," he said. "Miracles could happen."

The Travellers suspect that the Council may be trying to soften its image in advance of the crucial High Court review early next year. But Mr Lomax also pointed out that the Council is required by law to assess how an eviction would affect race relations. A local independent body – the Essex Race Equality Council – is currently collecting data on the Travellers, which leaves little doubt that the impact of eviction would be shattering.

Second, new government regulations require that an effort be made to find alternate land for Travellers who are marked for eviction. The Travellers have requested land at a nearby site, Pitsea. This has been rejected by the Basildon Council, but the original idea

came from the former Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, and Pitsea is not on Green Belt land. This could make it harder for the Council to maintain a hard-line position.

Mr Lomax said that while planning permission is not normally granted for Green Belt land, an approach based on rights is particularly relevant because the Dale Farm Travellers include elderly, disabled and sick. Article 8 of Britain's Human Rights Act calls for the rights of the family to be respected.

Adding to the pressure on the Basildon Council, the Travellers have proved effective advocates at home and abroad. The Children's Legal Centre at Essex University is suing the Basildon Council for releasing private data on the Travellers. Last month sympathizers for the Travellers marched on the British Embassy in Ireland and protested outside the residence of Britain's Prime Minister Gordon Brown.

This summer, The Advocacy Project recruited Zach Scott, a US national and student at Georgetown University, to volunteer as a Peace Fellow at Dale Farm – much to the irritation of local residents. After a local newspaper profiled Mr Scott, one reader commented: "Good riddance tree huggerDON'T COME BACK IN A HURRY!!!"

But the Basildon Council – and the British government – can expect more international pressure if hundreds of women and children are violently evicted and made homeless. In late October, human rights investigators from the UN and Council of Europe issued a statement deploring the lack of respect for housing rights in Europe. Four leading organizations followed up by comparing Dale Farm to several other "serial abuses" in Russia, Romania and elsewhere – a searing indictment of British policy.

The latest advocacy tactic by the Travellers is to bring attention to the destruction that always seems to follow evictions by the company (Constant and Company), which has been contracted by the Basildon Council to evacuate Dale Farm. The Travellers are demanding that Constant follow health and safety provisions, and have asked AP to publicize video footage of previous evictions.

If no agreement can be found between the Travellers and Basildon Council, the losing side will likely appeal against the High Court decision in February and the case could eventually go to the House of Lords, the upper house of parliament.

* To support the Travellers of Dale Farm, write to the Basildon Council demanding that alternate land be found: mailroom@basildon.gov.uk

* For blogs by Zach Scott, visit: <http://advocacynet.org/author/zach/>

* For profiles of Zach Scott and the reaction of local residents visit:

http://www.echonews.co.uk/search/display.var.1630933.0.zach_wraps_up_his_blog_from_dale_farm.php