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DALE FARM EVICTION CRISIS REACHES THE BRITISH HIGH COURT

London, February 14, 2008: The British High Court is considering an appeal by 86 Traveller families at the Dale Farm site amidst growing concern that their mass eviction would create a major medical emergency in southeast England.

The hearing started on Monday before Justice Collins, a senior judge on the Court, and was expected to end on Friday. It is the most significant development yet in the long-running Dale Farm controversy, which is testing Britain's commitment to the protection of vulnerable minorities.

The crisis began in June 2005, when the Basildon County Council ordered the 86 families evicted from their homes at Dale Farm because they have been denied planning permission. Dale Farm is in the Green Belt, which is protected from development.

Last week, the Dale Farm Housing Association, which represents the Travellers, interviewed 17 families that face eviction and found an 86-year-old woman in a wheelchair; her 76 year-old brother, who has been deaf since birth; a 67-year-old cancer patient; a young mother who is pregnant with twins; and two children with serious hearing disabilities.

“The medical condition of the Dale Farm population – particularly elderly, single mothers and children – is precarious. Eviction would create a medical crisis,” says the Association report.

The report was compiled with help from James Dasinger, a Peace Fellow from The Advocacy Project (AP) who is volunteering with the Association. It has been given to Keith Lomax, the lawyer who is coordinating the Travellers' legal defense team.

The poor health of the Dale Farm community is central to the Travellers' case, because under Britain's Human Rights Act the Basildon Council must show that the impact of eviction on the Travellers is outweighed by the need to protect the Green Belt and respect the integrity of local planning.

But the Association's survey suggests that the risk to the Travellers' health from eviction would far outweigh the impact of letting them stay. Once on the road, they would be unable to find regular treatment for chronic ailments. The education of their children, who attend the local primary school, would also be interrupted.

The Basildon Council has refused to assess the impact of eviction on race relations, as required by law, or find an alternative site for Travellers. In December, the Council was told to find 81 new Traveller housing plots by its own governing body, or Regional Assembly.

Justice Collins said on Monday that he expected to rule on the appeal by Easter. While he gave no hint of the likely verdict, he described the Council's position as "unhelpful" on several occasions and said he would call for a "rethink" of forced evictions.

Nonetheless, few are ready to predict the outcome of the High Court hearing. Two government ministers and several planning inspectors have ruled against the Travellers since 2005.

About forty Travellers hired a bus from Dale Farm and held a peaceful demonstration at the Court on Monday, before attending the hearing in the austere 126 year-old courthouse. Several said that reaching the High Court is a major achievement for their advocacy and expressed confidence in British justice. "Somebody out there must have a heart," said Mary-Anne McCarthy, a 68-year-old widow.

Zach Scott, from Georgetown University, served as the first AP Peace Fellow at Dale Farm last summer. AP hopes that Mr. Dasinger, his successor, will help the Travellers reach out to the mainstream human rights movement and develop an IT project for young Travellers.

Last week, the Travellers received a strong endorsement from the Gypsy Council, an influential UK-based advocacy group which plans to lobby all members of the Basildon Council against eviction.

- AP has posted interviews and [video footage of Dale Farm](#) and the demonstration outside the High Court.
- Read the blogs of [Zach Scott](#)

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