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URBAN SPRAWL TRUMPS MINORITY HOUSING RIGHTS IN UK AS DALE FARM TRAVELERS AGAIN FACE EVICTION

March 2, 2007, Dale Farm, UK, and Washington DC, USA: The British government has rejected a request for permanent planning permission by 86 Traveler families at the Dale Farm site in southeast England, opening the door to their forceful eviction later this year.

The decision was announced on February 22 by Ruth Kelly, the British Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. Ms. Kelly explained that the presence of the Travelers at Dale Farm is “harmful” to the environment and contributing to urban sprawl around London.

The news has come as a shock to the Travelers and their advocates. Richard Sheridan, President of the Dale Farm residents association, described Ms. Kelly’s decision as “particularly distressing” for the children, many of whom have been born at Dale Farm. Deaf children, elderly, and even people with cancer, will also be affected, he said.

Mr. Sheridan added that studies show that the British taxpayers will have to pay up to 18 million pounds (\$32m) in indirect costs if the 86 families are forced out onto the road. Putting them in emergency housing would cost more than 50 million pounds (\$92m).

Dale Farm has come to symbolize the dilemma that faces Travelers and Gypsies in the UK who own land but are denied permission to build on it. The Dale Farm Travelers have pursued two different avenues, political and legal. In 2003, they received temporary planning permission from the deputy Prime Minister John Prescott. This avenue has now closed with the decision by Ms Kelly, Mr. Prescott’s colleague in the government.

The Travelers’ legal battle began in June 2005, after the local Basildon Council authorized 3 million pounds to evict the 86 Traveler families. This would have been the largest-ever eviction in the UK, and it provoked an international outcry. The case was taken up by the British High Court, which put a stay on evictions until a hearing could be held. The hearing is expected this summer. If the decision goes against the Travelers, they will face almost certain eviction.

Ms. Kelly’s ruling is separate from the judicial review, but is likely to be viewed as a bad omen in advance of the High Court hearing because it weighs the housing rights of the Travelers against the environment – and finds against the Travelers.

In a posting on her ministry’s website, Ms. Kelly conceded that the Basildon Council has made no plans to find alternative accommodation for the Travelers. She also accepted that the Travelers have “put down roots” at Dale Farm, that many have “particular health

problems,” that their education will be “disrupted” and that their lives will be “much harder” if they are evicted. But, she concluded, all this was outweighed by the fact that they are living in the Green Belt, a strip of undeveloped land which surrounds London and is meant to prevent urban sprawl.

The problem with this argument, for Travelers, is that Green Belt exemptions are routinely given to non-Travelers, which shows the policy to be clearly discriminatory. Even within Dale Farm, scores of Traveler families received planning permission from a previous council and live intermingled with those who face eviction.

In addition, Dale Farm has won international notoriety because of the violent and destructive nature of evictions. Last October, The Advocacy Project (AP) visited a former Traveler housing plot near Dale Farm, which was torn up in an earlier eviction. The eviction has left a foul-smelling pit which poses a health hazard to Traveler children, but no effort has been made by the local or central authorities to clean it up. Travelers find this hard to reconcile with Ms. Kelly’s professed commitment to the environment.

The Travelers plan to take their case to the international community and appeal to UN human rights monitors, who have high moral standing and are taken seriously by the British government. AP will also continue to cover the controversy. AP’s visit last year was publicized in the British press, and AP has advertised for a volunteer to work at Dale Farm this summer and help the Association with its advocacy and networking.

* To support the Dale Farm campaign, visit the [website](#)

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