

## Health effects of forced evictions in the slums of Mumbai

The physical and emotional hardships faced by refugees, so powerfully shown by the hundreds of thousands of people who recently fled Kosovo, touch us because the media choose to highlight their plight. But the media invariably remain silent about the enormity of another sort of refugee crisis in the developing world: that of the forced eviction of people to make way for development projects. These projects, which include many urban-development schemes, displace ten million people a year in less-developed countries. Such forced eviction makes more people homeless than armed conflict, but this issue mostly goes unnoticed.

In Mumbai (formerly Bombay), a city of 12 million people, there has been a systematic programme of slum clearance. In 1998, the demolition squads of the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) evicted 167 000 people from their homes in the city's slums. The State Government of Maharashtra, of which Mumbai is part, has pledged that it will rehouse any evicted slum dweller who can prove that they were resident in the city on Jan 1, 1995. It has also drawn up guidelines for the services that should be provided for the resettled slum dwellers. Nonetheless, it is evident that both these ordinances have been ignored in Mumbai. The drive to modernise the city to achieve its political leaders' vision of developing the "new Singapore of Asia" in the global economy, is being achieved through fundamental attacks on the human rights of many of its poor citizens.

The case of the slum dwellers of Ambedkar Nagar epitomises the plight of the slum dwellers of Mumbai. Ambedkar Nagar was a slum of 5000 people living on 8000 m<sup>2</sup> of reclaimed land on the southern tip of the city. These people were imported by labour contractors from the villages of India to build the modern skyline of Mumbai. Once the building work was finished they stayed to work in the fish docks, as labourers and servants. They settled on an area of tidal mangrove swamp that they reclaimed from the sea. Their labour made a swamp into a piece of valuable real estate.

Over the past 10 years, the slum dwellers of Ambedkar Nagar have faced eviction 45 times. Each time, the demolition squad has destroyed some or all the huts so that the slum dwellers have been forced to repeatedly rebuild their shelters. On the morning of the May 18, 1998, despite promises made to lawyers, the demolition squad and police moved into the slum once again to carry out an eviction and cleared the site. By that evening, all that remained of Ambedkar Nagar was a temple to the Hindu deity Ganesh, the god of auspicious events.

The resettlement site allocated to the slum dwellers is adjacent to the old slum. The haste with which the authorities conducted the eviction meant that the slum dwellers were inadequately surveyed. Less than a third of the original households were allocated plots of about 9 m<sup>2</sup> on which to build a new shelter. Water, sanitation, and drainage were not provided. The rest of the people were forced to divide the remaining land between them. Most of the slum dwellers had no choice but to rebuild their crude shelters of bamboo and plastic on the tidal mangrove swamp. These people now live in the Arabian Sea.

Repeated eviction has had a profound effect on the health of this already impoverished population. 2 months after the eviction, we undertook a study of women and children in Ambedkar Nagar. Of 70 children, aged 12–59 months, 46 were stunted (<2 SD height for age), indicating protracted deprivation, and 12 were wasted (<2 SD weight for height). Six children had hair and skin signs consistent with a diagnosis of kwashiorkor and two had florid signs of rickets. In a larger sample of 100 prepubescent children, we found that two thirds showed obvious pallor and over a quarter had signs of hypovitaminosis A. Of these, 22 had conjunctival xerosis, four had Bitot's spots, and one 4-year-old boy had corneal xerosis. Despite immediate treatment, this boy died less than a week after examination. We also found evidence of widespread infection: diarrhoea, respiratory infections including pneumonia, and skin infections were most common.



Child from Ambedkar Nagar

N D Emmel

Repeated eviction wears away at the household economy. Each time the huts were demolished, the women explained, money had to be found to rebuild shelters. They also described how they initially developed coping mechanisms to offset the crisis, but that such behaviour was subsequently eroded by the repeated demolition of their huts. At first money was available from wages to buy hutbuilding material. This, along with community savings, was soon exhausted and households were obliged to sell limited jewellery and brass vessels—a common form of saving in low-income communities. By the time of the final eviction, many of the households had exhausted these avenues and turned to money-lenders. Loans, with interest rates in excess of 100%, were rarely paid before another loan was needed to rebuild the shelter. As one woman told us "each time our hut is destroyed there is less money to feed the children. Who will feed the children?"<sup>1</sup>

This eviction, along with countless others, has been carried out despite Article 21 of India's Constitutions recognising the "right to life".<sup>2</sup> The Supreme Court of India has interpreted this Article on at least two occasions. Most recently in 1991, the judges considered that "the right to life includes the right to live with human dignity and all that goes along with it, namely the bare necessities of life such as adequate nutrition, clothing and shelter over the head".<sup>3</sup> India also ratified the United Nations Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights in 1966. Article 11(1) of the Covenant calls upon signatories to observe the "right to . . . housing and continuous improvement in living conditions".<sup>4</sup> Despite this legal framework, it is evident that the BMC, in striving to achieve its vision of a modern Mumbai, is ignoring the plight of the poor of the city.

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- 3 The Supreme Court of India. Francis Coralie vs Union Territory of Delhi SC753, 1991.
- 4 UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. E/C.12/1997/4. General Comment no 7, 1997.