

The letters arrived just before Christmas last year, 134 envelopes addressed to the residents of Runcurel, a village in Romania's south west.

Inside was the news that Jilt Nord, a state-owned coal mine, planned to expand and the people of Runcurel would lose their homes and land.

One of 12 lignite mines under state-owned energy holding company Oltenia Energy Complex, Jilt Nord is running out of coal and its owners want the land where the villagers' houses stand.

Backed by a Romanian government executive decree dated Dec. 9, the mine was declared a project of national importance and earlier attempts to reach a deal with villagers were abandoned.

Runcurel's people were given 30 days to clear their homes in exchange for one euro per 1 square metre of land.

The villagers say no compensation was offered for homes, orchards, crops or other assets linked to the land and have lodged court action against the company.

However, OEC disputes this, saying it offered various forms of recompense.

"OEC went to the town hall, made a list of the pieces of land, prepared expropriation papers and then sent notifications by post to the owners to come to the company and give away their property rights in exchange for the set compensation," villager Nicolae Bratu said.

"That was all the negotiation we got," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "That's why people are revolting now. I will not allow them to take away my good farming land and leave me without a home."

The rapid industrialisation of Romania under communist rule saw a national expansion of coal mines and power plants. But after the revolution of 1989 properties taken by the state for mine expansion were restored to their owners or their descendants in many parts of the country.

But in Runcurel the battle continues with OEC which was set up in 2012 with the Romanian economy ministry holding about 77 percent and blue-chip investment fund Fondul Proprietatea owning about 21.5 percent.

Walking along the edge of the 4 kilometre open-cut mine, Bratu joked that he was "inspecting his property" because the land the pit lies in was also taken by the company - without compensation - during the communist era.

The Thomson Reuters Foundation interviewed 10 other villagers in Runcurel and all echoed Bratu's comments, saying they had never been approached by a company representative.

In response to written questions from the Thomson Reuters Foundation, a OEC spokesman said "all steps in the expropriation process up until now were completed according to the

law and to the relocation plan”.

The spokesman said negotiations with villagers are ongoing, adding they have been offered several options for compensation, including being moved to a nearby village, Telesti.

According to OEC’s relocation plan the community must be consulted and all options for compensation, from transfer to another village built by the company to individual financial compensation or even land swaps, must be discussed.

The plan, obtained by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, also describes a pledge to expand nearby Telesti for Runcurel residents who chose to relocate.

This would include relocating the Runcurel church, a historic building protected by national heritage legislation, that sits just 50 metres from the mine’s edge.

According to the document, construction of new homes in Telesti was supposed to be finalised by June 2016 but in April this year all that was visible on the ground was a bare field.

The villagers say that over the years, the company’s precursor, the state-owned Turceni Energy Complex, approached some residents individually to offer compensation for moving. However, nationalisation of land in Romania during the communist years meant many Runcurel villagers no longer have property deeds and titles and could not prove ownership. Others, like Bratu, obtained court rulings to confirm ownership but were still unable to secure their property deeds from the local county’s town hall.

The Mayor could not be reached despite calls from the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

However, Greenpeace Romania spokesman Ionut Apostol said he had spoken to two Town Hall officials, including the vice mayor, and they provided information on the number of houses earmarked for demolition.

Another villager, Ilie Gorun, said he had contacted the company on his own initiative and attempted to swap his land for a secure job with OEC, with the area one of high unemployment and few opportunities for work outside the energy sector.

Gorun said that the company took his land in return for a job – but employment lasted only a few months.

In February this year, Laurentiu Ciobotarica, the company chief executive, stated that “the population was informed and consulted in accordance with the relocation plan”.

The relocation plan was drafted in line with ministerial guidelines on land expropriation and states the government should only resort to issuing a decree to expropriate the land if the outlined re-location options cannot be implemented.

Ciobotarica comments, seen by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, were provided in writing to two charities, Bankwatch Romania and Greenpeace Romania, on Feb. 25 in response to

their formal complaint that the villagers' evacuations were illegal.

Written questions from the Thomson Reuters Foundation to the government seeking comment on the villagers' claims that they have not been consulted as required by the plan were also referred back to the company.

"The expropriation procedure is the responsibility of OEC which has the obligation to fully comply with national legislation," a Romanian government spokeswoman said.

She added villagers have a legal right to take the matter to court and sue the company if they found the compensation unfair.

The spokeswoman also said expanding the mine "would increase Romania's energy security and promote indigenous energy sources".

On March 18 villagers from Runcurel, with the help of Bankwatch and Greenpeace, filed a case to sue the government in a bid to have the decision to reclaim their land revoked.

The court documents, seen by the Thomson Reuters Foundation, state the environmental permit issued for the mine's expansion is linked to a formal strategy to relocate the villagers to nearby Telesti at OEC expense, which remains unimplemented.

Additionally, the document states the government's executive decree contradicts Romania's national energy strategy which seeks to reduce energy production from coal and discourages new energy projects with significant socio-cultural impacts.

"Expansion of coal mines is not in the national interest," said Greenpeace Romania's Ionut Apostol.

"By 2025, Romania should not have any more functioning coal-based power plants into which lignite could feed.

"This is because all plants are reaching the end of their lifetime and because European Union directives for pollution reduction involve expensive investment which do not make sense when the plant's life is nearing its end."

He added other attempts to build new coal plants in Romania over recent years have failed as investors pulled out amid concerns over the economic viability of such projects.

Back in Runcurel, Gheorghe Ancuteru, one of the villagers set to lose his land, said he had a constitutional right to private property.

"I cannot understand how it is possible that, without any warning, without asking me anything, the government just issues a decree," he said.

"It's not even a law passed by the parliament - to throw me out of my home saying that this is in the national interest. Without fair compensation, without giving us jobs."

Asked for response, the government reiterated its statement that OEC has full responsibility to implement the relocation plan but added the "ministry of energy would be analysing how

the plan has been implemented by the company".
source: news.trust.org