

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

## PUBLIC STATEMENT

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### **Serbia: New threats of forced evictions of Roma families put signs of progress at risk**

Amnesty International is concerned that Roma families living in informal settlements in Belgrade are yet again at risk of forced eviction. Recent actions by municipal authorities in Belgrade call into question both the government and city authorities' commitment to uphold their obligations to prevent forced evictions, placing dozens of Roma families at risk of a range of human rights violations.

In the past few weeks, both Zemun and Novi Beograd municipalities have issued orders and started operations in two settlements, which if carried out fully would effectively result in the forced eviction of the many families living there, in violation of Serbia's international obligations.

On 22 July, a private construction company acting with the consent of the Novi Beograd municipal assembly started operations to "clean up accumulated garbage" from an area adjacent to Blok 72 on Dr Ivan Ribar street. Between six and seven Roma families live in an informal settlement on this land, some of them for a number of years. They had received no advance notice and were not consulted about the work.

On the first day of the "cleaning operation", and in the absence of adequate legal and procedural safeguards including the offer of alternative accommodation, one home was destroyed. A single mother, who had lived in the settlement for six years, together with her four children aged between one and six years old, were made homeless; she is now temporarily with relatives. The company's employees, have told the remaining families that more houses are likely to be destroyed during the "cleaning operation", effectively equating people's homes with 'garbage'.

At the Ratko Mitrović settlement (also known as Grmeč) in Zemun municipality, at least 53 Roma families, amounting to over 200 people, have been ordered to demolish their homes. These families, who were internally displaced from Kosovo in 1999-2000, have been living there for more than fifteen years, tolerated by the authorities and the landowner. Without any prior consultation, or advance notice, the Zemun municipality's construction inspectorate issued orders to all households on 7-10 July 2015, which stated that the families should demolish their homes within one day of receiving the order, on the grounds that the homes were built without construction permits.

No demolitions have been carried out so far, but the authorities have threatened to enforce the order, and will demolish the houses should the families fail to do so. However, in the absence of any further information from the authorities, it is unclear when this will happen. To date, the Roma families living in Grmeč have not been offered any alternative accommodation, and will be made homeless if the demolition orders are enforced.

Amnesty International has urged the City of Belgrade authorities and the government to suspend these operations, and guarantee the right to adequate housing to all affected families. According to international standards, this obligation extends to all tiers of the government, including both city and municipal authorities.

Amnesty International considers the forced eviction of Roma families from Blok 72 and the Ratko Mitrović settlement to be a massive step backwards in the limited and gradual progress that Serbia has been making towards ensuring the rights of Roma to adequate housing.

#### **FURTHER INFORMATION**

On 23 July Amnesty International wrote to Zorana Mihajlović, Deputy Prime Minister responsible for the advancement of Roma, urging her to ensure that the demolition orders are suspended, and ensure the Roma families are not forcibly evicted. Amnesty International reminded the Minister of the Serbian authorities' obligations at all levels to engage in genuine consultation with the affected families and offer adequate alternative accommodation.

Since 2012, Amnesty International has been encouraged by the fact that the city authorities have begun to adopt international standards with respect to development-based evictions, particularly, though not exclusively, in the case of the resettlement of Roma from the Belvil settlement.

Amnesty International also notes steps taken by the government in establishing a working group charged with drafting a law prohibiting forced evictions and providing guidelines to ensure that any future evictions are carried out in accordance with international standards. It has also been reported that the City of Belgrade is planning to redraft its strategy on informal Roma settlements.

Under international standards, if there are no other alternatives to eviction, legal and procedural safeguards against forced eviction should be put in place, including the right to appeal and the right to a remedy. A resettlement action plan should be developed prior to any lawful eviction, in genuine consultation with the families, providing suitable alternative housing and reflecting the needs of the affected households.