

# BULGARIA

## Torture and ill-treatment of Roma

### INTRODUCTION

*Amnesty International is concerned about reports that members of the Roma community in Bulgaria have been increasingly subjected to torture and otherwise ill-treated by police officers. The organization believes that in many cases such treatment might have been motivated by the victims' ethnic background.*

### BACKGROUND

*Although the results of the December 1992 census have not officially been published, the Roma community in Bulgaria is generally assumed to be around 600,000. Some Roma organizations claim that the actual number is closer to one million but that many do not identify themselves with the community for fears of discrimination. In either case this population is the second largest ethnic minority in Bulgaria after the ethnic Turks.*

*The political changes initiated in Bulgaria in 1989 were not followed by an improvement in the social conditions of the Roma community. The Roma community has been traditionally the lowest*

strata of the society. After 1989, Roma were able freely to organize themselves and a number of organizations have been established. These remain, however, politically weak because of internal divisions and a generally low level of political awareness. On the other hand, the lifting of previous restrictions on freedom of expression has transformed more subtle forms of discrimination into open racial hatred and violence against Roma.

According to a report of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee the treatment of Roma by the authorities is the most important ethnic minority problem in the country today. In the current economic crisis in Bulgaria, a low level of literacy and poor professional qualifications have left about 70% (in a number of places up to 90%) of the Roma population unemployed. In some cases it is alleged that dismissals and redundancy measures have been motivated by ethnic prejudice.

Massive unemployment and severe economic and social problems force many Roma into crime, mostly theft. In January it was reported by the Bulgarian Telegraph Agency that one third of over 70,000 offenders apprehended by the police in 1992 were Roma. However, much of the Bulgarian mass media, often referring pejoratively to Roma as "our dark-skinned compatriots", considers them responsible for the greatest proportion of the crimes committed.

This further increases ethnic divisions and prejudices. A poll conducted by the National Institute of Youth Studies in May 1991 found that 89% of the respondents described Roma as thieves while others spoke of them as bullies, black marketeers and liars. Social prejudices are so deep-rooted that the very presence of Roma in a neighbourhood is regarded with disapproval. They are usually the

first to be accused as suspects for any disturbance or crime that is committed.

There is also a growing concern about the rising number, particularly in Sofia, of homeless Roma children. The Human Rights Project of the Helsinki Citizens' Assembly is trying to set up a shelter for homeless children in Sofia, where around 150 children live in subway passages of the Central Railway Station and in an underground vault of an uncompleted construction site close to the Sheraton hotel. They beg on the streets and live in small groups. Most are addicted to inhaling glue, explaining that it quenches the feeling of hunger. These children are increasingly attacked and harassed by groups of nationalist youth and gangs of schoolboys, armed with metal bars and stones.

Confirming his policy to improve inter-ethnic relations, Bulgarian President Zhelyu Zhelev met representatives of the Associated Romany Union in November 1992 and pledged to initiate a government program to address the problems of the Roma community, particularly unemployment.

In September 1992, April and May 1993, Amnesty International wrote to the Bulgarian Government expressing concern about the allegations of torture and other ill-treatment of Roma in the cases which are described in this report. The organization received only one reply, from the Minister of Justice in October 1992, stating that an investigation had been initiated by the Ministry of

Interior into the allegations of torture of Roma in Pazardjik. However, no findings of this investigation have yet been made public.

#### CASES OF ILL-TREATMENT BY POLICE

##### ***Alleged torture and ill-treatment of Roma in Pazardjik***

On 28 June at around 9pm police officers in Pazardjik clashed with 200 Roma demonstrators. In this incident, according to information received by Amnesty International, three police officers were injured by stones and two Roma men were wounded by gun shots. One man with a machete was arrested.

The following morning, at around 6am the Roma community neighbourhood was reportedly surrounded by police officers armed with submachine guns and leading dogs in order to search all the houses for arms and to check identification documents. Doors and windows were broken down in both occupied and unoccupied houses. Furniture, household appliances and other objects were destroyed. In many instances the police allegedly stole money and other objects of value.

The police officers reportedly used truncheons and sticks to beat indiscriminately men, women and children. In one instance, the inhabitants of a house were reportedly taken out while their house was searched, made to stand against the wall and were told by police officers that they would be shot. Nasko Iliiev Angelov's leg was broken

with a hammer in the presence of his wife and children. Georgi Assenov Yurtov was tied and beaten in the street. He was taken to hospital in a state of shock. Several people with lighter injuries were reportedly turned away from this hospital by policemen guarding the entrance.

### ***The case of Anton Stefanov Assenov and Stefan Assenov Ivanov***

On 19 September 1992, at around 3pm, Anton Stefanov Assenov, a 14-year-old boy, and his father, Stefan Assenov Ivanov, were allegedly beaten by police officers at the bus station in Shumen. Anton Stefanov Assenov was reportedly taken to an empty room at the station by a plainclothes police officer, who did not identify himself. The police officer later claimed that he had caught the boy gambling. He allegedly beat Anton Stefanov Assenov with his fists and kicked him in the legs. Anton's parents, Stefan Assenov Ivanov and Fidanka Yordanova Ivanova, attempted to enter the room where their son was being detained but were not allowed to do so. In the meantime two uniformed police officers arrived at the bus station and reportedly started beating both the father and the son with truncheons. Anton Assenov and Stefan Ivanov were then taken to the police station where Anton was beaten again. He was then handcuffed to a radiator for two hours before being released. He was not formally charged with any offence.

Two days later Anton Stefanov Assenov was examined by a doctor who stated that the injuries, bruises on his head, back, chest and right armpit, were consistent with the alleged beatings.

Anton's parents filed a complaint with the Regional Department of the Ministry of Interior. They received a reply in which the conduct of the police officers was assessed as appropriate and without excessive use of force. The parents also complained to the Varna Military Prosecutor who on 24 March 1993 rejected their request for investigation of the allegations of ill-treatment by police officers in this incident. Their request was denied after police officers stated that Anton Stefanov Assenov was in fact beaten by his father. Stefan Assenov Ivanov has filed an appeal against the decision of the Varna Military Prosecutor.

### ***The case of Khristo Nedialkov Khristov***

On 24 March 1993 at about 7.30pm Khristo Nedialkov Khristov, a 33-year-old Rom, was apprehended by seven or eight police officers in Stara Zagora. He was suspected of attempting to steal copper wire from a telephone cable shaft close to the Roma neighbourhood. Immediately after his arrest Khristo Nedialkov Khristov was reportedly beaten with truncheons and kicked all over the body.

That same evening at about 10.30pm two police cars reportedly came to the Roma neighbourhood and stopped in front of the house where Khristo Nedialkov Khristov lives. In what appears to have been

a demonstration of force intended to frighten the Roma community, the police officers were allegedly armed with guns, truncheons and hand-cuffs and shouted racist insults at Khristo's family and neighbours who came out into the street. One officer opened the boot of a police car into which Khristo had been bundled. The police officer then pulled him by a belt which was reportedly tied tightly around Khristo's neck. After his identity had been confirmed by his parents he was taken to the police station. His father followed and at about 2am was told by the officer on duty, Captain Damianov, that his son was alive and safe and that he should go home.

On 25 March 1993 at around 10am Khristo was released but was reportedly unable to stand. He told his family that he had been beaten during the night, hit with truncheons and kicked with heavy boots. He was taken home and his chest was wrapped in a lamb skin, believed locally to heal chest injuries. That evening his condition sharply deteriorated and he was taken to the District Hospital where he was admitted into the Surgical Unit.

Khristo Nedialkov Khristov was visited the next day by representatives of the Human Rights Project of the Helsinki Citizen's Assembly (HRP). According to their report Khristo could hardly breath or speak.

"His body bore signs of torture. His chest was being drained by means of a probe, which led the air and blood out of the thorax. He was also fitted with a urine catheter. There was a massive

under-skin haemorrhage on the right side of his waist continuing toward his back...There was a deep red scar on his neck, from the policeman's belt."

The chief doctor of the Surgical Unit, Professor Levcheva, told the HRP representatives that the injuries most probably resulted from kicks. Khristo Nedialkov Khristov sustained several broken ribs on both sides of his chest. The broken ribs had punctured the lining surrounding the lungs, which led to air entering the chest cavity (pneumothorax). The left lung had been in a stage of total collapse at the moment of hospitalization. At the time of the interview his kidneys and other organs had not yet been examined.

Professor Levcheva was told by the HRP representatives of the alleged cause of Khristo Nedialkov Khristov's injuries and was asked to call in a forensic expert to issue a medical certificate. The HRP representatives came back to the hospital two hours later to take a copy of the medical certificate. They were informed by a nurse that police officers who came to the hospital at 3.20pm gave specific instructions not to give anyone such a document.

During the evening of 28 March 1993 Khristo's condition sharply deteriorated and he underwent a surgical intervention during which a part of his lung and a kidney were removed.



In April 1993 Amnesty International urged the Bulgarian authorities to fully and impartially investigate the alleged torture of Khristo Nedialkov Khristov. The Minister of Internal Affairs has reportedly instructed the Director of National Police to conduct the investigation personally.

### ***Alleged torture and ill-treatment of Roma in Novi Pazar***

On 5 April 1993, between 3am and 5am, around 60 police officers came to the Roma neighbourhood in Novi Pazar claiming to be in search of suspected criminals. The officers wore balaclavas, some wore plainclothes while others wore camouflage uniforms. They reportedly broke into Roma homes, in some cases breaking down doors and windows. Around 50 people were arrested. The police did not present proper search or arrest warrants. The men who were released on bail were allegedly not given appropriate documents and bail affidavits, while 26 of those arrested remain in detention.

According to the statements received by Amnesty International, police officers beat indiscriminately men, women and children of the Roma community. Marin Assenov Ivanov collapsed when the police put a gun to the chin of his wife Radka Marinova Yordanova and threatened to shoot her. He was arrested, but his wife was subsequently refused any information on her husband's condition when she inquired at the Shumen police station.

Two police officers reportedly broke into the home of Martin Mitkov Rumenov who had already left the house to go to work the

morning shift in the local factory. His wife was woken up by the officers who threw off the blankets and directed a torchlight onto her naked body asking for the whereabouts of her husband. They also repeatedly insulted her.

Milen Assenov Sashov was reportedly beaten by police officers in front of his wife. The front door and a window of their house were broken by the police.

When the police came looking for Anton Khristov Assenov, a 21-year-old Rom, his mother told them that he no longer lived in Novi Pazar but in the village of Tsonevo. He was arrested there and reportedly beaten in the police station in Shumen. The prosecutor there reportedly told his mother: "I will not release your son. Gypsies should be beaten every other day."

One boy who was interviewed by the representatives of a local Roma association told how the police pulled his hair and hit his head against the wall. Fidanka Marinova Assenov, a 14-year-old girl, suffered partial facial paralysis from the shock she experienced during the house search. Sevdalin Ivanov Khristov's baby boy was bruised on the chin when he was thrown against the bed.

In May 1993 Amnesty International urged the Bulgarian Government to initiate an independent, impartial inquiry into the

*alleged ill-treatment of the Novi Pazar residents, to make public its findings and to bring to justice all those found responsible.*