

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

PUBLIC STATEMENT

21 August 2012
AI Index: EUR 21/010/2012

France: Inter-ministerial meeting must make a firm commitment to end forced evictions of Roma

On Wednesday 22 August 2012, the French Prime Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault is scheduled to hold a high-level inter-ministerial meeting on the situation of Roma in France. The meeting is expected to draw together the relevant government ministers, and is the first of its kind under the new government which has been in place since May 2012. It follows recent statements of position by cabinet ministers including the Minister of the Interior, Manuel Valls and the Minister of Housing, Cécile Duflot, and by local mayors, on the issue of evictions of Roma from unauthorised camps, and a reported recent spate of evictions of Roma camps in various regions of France.

On 17 August, Amnesty International wrote to the Prime Minister calling on the French government to ensure that human rights are at the heart of any discussion of the situation of Roma in France. The government must make a firm, public commitment that all evictions respect France's obligations under international human rights law. No eviction should render anyone homeless or vulnerable to other violations of their human rights. Further, Amnesty International urges the new government to ensure that any policy it adopts is one which aims to end forced evictions of Roma living in unauthorised camps in France.

In February and June 2012, representatives of Amnesty International conducted in-depth research on the housing situation of Roma in France, concentrating in particular on the Ile-De-France region. Amnesty International representatives visited several unauthorised camps and squats, as well as some "integration villages" (villages d'insertion) and ad hoc solutions proposed by local authorities, and spoke with several inhabitants of these camps. The vast majority of those interviewed by Amnesty International reported having been forcibly evicted several times over recent years, and said that with each eviction they found themselves living in more precarious conditions than before.

For example, a 32 year old Roma woman from Romania, mother of three, living in a camp in Saint Denis (in the Seine-Saint-Denis department, north east of central Paris) told Amnesty International that since moving to France with her family when she was nine years old, she had been living in barracks and evicted repeatedly. She said on average they stayed between five and seven months in each place. "We are evicted from everywhere, we have no home, no conditions to live in", she said.

Another 31 year old Roma woman from Romania, who was the mother of two living in a squat in Sucy-en-Brie, said that following previous evictions, she and her family had lived in tents for months: "It was very hard, we did not have anywhere to sleep. We were four people sharing one mattress, the wind was blowing, it was raining, and nobody had anything to eat," she said. "Everyone chases us away".

One of the main concerns identified by Amnesty International in its research is that the French legal system lacks the necessary safeguards against forced evictions, for instance there is no obligation under French law to consult the inhabitants before a planned eviction, and French law does not prohibit evictions that would render inhabitants homeless or vulnerable to other human rights violations. Any policy decided by the government should include a reform of the laws applicable to eviction to bring them in line with the international standards on evictions.

In March 2012, President François Hollande responded in writing to the Romeurope NGO coalition, when he was a candidate to the presidential elections, stating “It is my wish that whenever an unsanitary camp is dismantled, alternative solutions be proposed. We cannot continue to accept that families are chased from a place without a solution. This leads them to settle elsewhere, in conditions that are no better”.

In an article published on 13 August in the newspaper *Libération*, the Minister of the Interior Manuel Valls stated, in relation to evictions of Roma, that public policy needed to be characterized by “firmness”. In relation to “the multiplication of unsanitary camps, dangerous as much for their occupants as for their neighbours,” the Minister stated that public policy needed to be more firm and less passive in order to resolve the situation. Amnesty International stresses that this need for “firmness” must never be at the expense of human rights, and that adequate alternative housing must always be offered to people facing an eviction.

Indeed, on 16 August, Cécile Duflot, the Minister of Housing, was reported in the press as stating that to dismantle those camps without solutions was to put the people in an even more precarious situation, and that “that cannot be a solution, either”. She also stated that “France must do its part for the few Roma who live in our country, evaluated to be around 15 000 people out of 66 million French people. It is a problem that we have the means to deal with”.

In an interview published by the online journal Médiapart with police officers of the CRS who took part in evictions of Roma camps in greater Lille in early August, one of them reportedly said of the eviction that “It is the same as usual, we just moved the problem elsewhere” “We are requested to evict them, but no one is ready to receive them in their department. The problem is not solved, it’s all just a bit of window dressing.”

Amnesty International hopes that the new French government will use the inter-ministerial meeting on 22 August to make a clear, public political commitment to set a policy on the housing situation of Roma that places human rights at its heart. Such a policy must prioritise putting an end to forced evictions of Roma and ensure their access to adequate housing.

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