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Amnesty International calls on the Italian authorities to protect Roma from violence

Amnesty International is concerned at reports that attempted racist attacks took place in Pescara, Italy, and its surroundings, during the last few days. The Pescara chief of police reported that Romani families were leaving the area or hiding in their homes, in fear of possible attacks. The organization urges Italian authorities to take all necessary measures to protect Romani communities from harassment and attacks, to publicly condemn racist violence and incitement to racist violence and racial hatred, to promptly and thoroughly investigate acts of racially motivated harassment and violence, and to ensure that the perpetrators of such acts are prosecuted under laws which provide for penalties reflecting the gravity of the crime.

Following the killing of a 24-year old football supporter, Domenico Rigante, on 1 May, allegedly at the hands of an Italian citizen of Romani ethnicity, groups of fellow football supporters and friends of the victim demonstrated against the presence of Romani communities in Pescara. Demonstrations were not violent, but discriminatory remarks and threats of violence against Roma were widespread. According to reports, during the following days unidentified groups of people went to places generally frequented by Romani residents, in an apparent attempt to threaten or attack them. A Romani man from the area interviewed by Amnesty International reported that Romani women had been insulted and made to go away from shops, and from the areas around the school gates where they were collecting their children. He also reported that, during the night between 7 and 8 May, blanks were allegedly fired by unknown people in the neighbourhood of Rancitelli, in Pescara, inhabited by a high number of Roma, apparently with the intent to frighten residents.

On the morning of 6 May, having participated in a gathering to commemorate Domenico Rigante, at least a hundred demonstrators reportedly tried to get to Rancitelli. They were stopped by the prompt intervention of the police. Also according to reports, during the following night, a group of about 40-50 people, with their faces covered by scarves and hats, entered a bingo in Pescara and another one in Montesilvano, a few kilometres from Pescara, with the apparent intent to attack Roma who often attend the venues. No one was subject to attack, however, as no Roma were found inside.

Amnesty International notes that the alleged killer of Domenico Rigante and four suspected accomplices were arrested by police a few days after the crime, and that other suspected accomplices are being tracked by investigators. While acknowledging police's efforts to bring to justice those responsible for the killing and to protect the Roma community in the area, the organization emphasizes that Italian authorities at all levels must take positive action to prevent attacks and harassment against Roma and ensure that their public statements underscore that communities must never be blamed for acts of individuals, that penal responsibility is individual, and that Roma are entitled to the full protection of the law.

In December 2011 a Romani settlement in Turin was subject to an arson attack, following reports that a girl had been raped by Romani men. The reports turned out to be false when the alleged victim retracted her accusations.

Amnesty International notes that for several years representatives of the authorities at local and national level through their public statements have fostered a climate of intolerance towards Romani people, by making unsubstantiated claims linking the mere presence of Roma to increased crime and insecurity. In the name of security, over the past years, Italian authorities have implemented measures that have aggravated

discrimination against Roma, such as a state of emergency declared in 2008 (the so-called “Nomad Emergency”) which was ruled unlawful by the highest Italian administrative court in November 2011.

Amnesty International is concerned by recent statements made by the Mayor of Pescara in the context of the current situation and reported by media, suggesting that rules and procedures governing access to and expulsion from social housing should be reviewed to allow for a more flexible use of evictions. Amnesty International reminds all authorities that access to and enjoyment of adequate housing is a human right and has nothing to do with the investigation and prosecution of crimes. The organization is also concerned by a statement on the official website of the Pescara police, posted on 8 May, describing the “massive presence” of Roma in the province as “a critical factor of primary importance”. Amnesty International is further concerned at statements attributed to the Pescara Chief of Police explicitly linking confiscations and other police operations targeting Roma, carried out in recent days in the context of investigations unrelated to the killing of Domenico Rigante, to the need to respond to general public’s expectations to cut down on crime by Roma. Amnesty International considers that the decision to undertake police operations should be dictated only by the need to prevent and prosecute crimes, whatever the ethnicity of the suspects may be. While acknowledging the need to combat crime and enforce the rule of law and the efforts made to protect the Roma community in Pescara, the organization calls on all the authorities to refrain from statements which may reinforce the idea of a link between Roma and crime.

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