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France: Authorities must stop forcibly evicting Roma

Amnesty International is deeply concerned that on 1 September the French authorities forcibly evicted between 150 and 200 Romani individuals from a camp in Saint-Denis (Paris region). This is the latest in a series of forced evictions that have been conducted by the French authorities. Forced evictions violate various regional and international human rights treaties, to which France is a party, requiring it to respect people's rights to adequate housing and to refrain from and prevent forced evictions. The forced eviction on 1 September of the Roma camp located close to the Delafontaine Hospital in Saint-Denis was reportedly carried out by an anti-riot police force (the Compagnies Républicaines de Sécurité, CRS). According to media reports, tens of families—believed to be from Bulgaria and Romania—were evicted from makeshift homes in the Saint-Denis camp, which were then demolished on the basis of an eviction order issued by the first instance court (Tribunal de Grande Instance) in Bobigny on 18 July. According to testimonies gathered by the NGO Médecins du Monde, the inhabitants were not given adequate information or notice, nor were they consulted by the authorities prior to the eviction.

The families whose homes were demolished were reportedly directed by police to a nearby tram station where they were forced to board a tram which was made available by the public transport operator RATP for the eviction, without any indication of the destination. Local RATP officials later confirmed publicly that the tram had been made available to the police “on the basis of a decision taken locally as an emergency measure” to avoid delays on the tram line.

According to information available to Amnesty International, anti-riot police officers boarded the tram with the inhabitants and stopped them from leaving. Some children were reportedly separated from their parents or adult family members in the process, including once the tram had reached its destination in Noisy-le-Sec, where they were reportedly forced to board a suburban train (RER). Testimonies said that anti-riot police officers stood at several train stations to prevent the evicted inhabitants from leaving the train. Reports also indicate that some families then tried to settle down in different places but were evicted by the authorities. Their current whereabouts are unknown.

Livia Otal, coordinator of the Roma mission at Médecins du Monde in la Plaine Saint-Denis, told Amnesty International that she was extremely concerned about the possibility for those who were evicted to access medical assistance. The team at Saint-Denis had been providing such assistance to the inhabitants of the camp, but has been unable to locate the majority of people since the eviction.

Forced evictions are the removal of people from the homes or land they occupy, against their will and without legal protections and due process. Under international law, evictions may only be carried out as a last resort, and only after all feasible alternatives have been explored in genuine consultation with the affected communities. The authorities must provide adequate notice; legal remedies; and compensation for all losses. They must ensure no one is made homeless or vulnerable to the violation of other human rights as a consequence of the eviction. People who can not provide for themselves must be provided with adequate alternative housing. These safeguards must be applied in all situations, irrespective of whether people legally own or occupy the homes or land that they are living on. Governments are prohibited from using forced eviction as a punitive measure.

The effects of forced evictions are often catastrophic. People are deprived of their possessions and of their social ties, and left without access to work, education and health facilities. Most of those who are forcibly evicted are left homeless and even more at risk of human rights violations than before.

The French authorities also failed to respect people's right to freedom of movement and to choose their place of residence by forcing the evicted families to leave the area, compelling them to board a tram against their will and preventing them from leaving the trains.

On 27 April, Amnesty International wrote to the Minister of the Interior, following his appointment to the post, urging him to ensure that the French authorities did not carry out any forced evictions of Roma communities and that any evictions were carried out only as a last resort and in full compliance with the guarantees required under regional and international human rights law and standards. Amnesty International has to date not received any response.

Amnesty International urges the French government to provide the inhabitants of the camp in Saint-Denis with access to effective remedies, adequate alternative housing and compensation for all losses. The authorities must immediately ensure the families that were separated as a result of the eviction are reunited, and clarify the current whereabouts of those who were forcibly evicted on 1 September. The organization also calls on the French government to stop these forced evictions and to respect every person's right to adequate housing and freedom of movement.

Background information

The series of evictions is taking place against a context of stigmatization of Roma by leading French politicians who initially referred explicitly to "Roma", and now also seem to be targeting them by their nationality. During a ministerial meeting in July 2010 to discuss "the problems related to the behaviour of certain Roma and Travellers", President Nicolas Sarkozy referred to "illegal camps" inhabited by Roma as sources of criminality, calling on the government to dismantle those camps within three months. On 5 August 2010, the Ministry of the Interior instructed prefects to systematically dismantle "illegal camps", explicitly prioritizing those inhabited by Roma, and to conduct "the immediate removal of foreigners in an irregular situation". Following its publication by the media, the order was removed and replaced on 13 September by one which referred to "any illegal settlement, whoever inhabits it".

As recently as 29 August, the Minister of the Interior, Claude Gueant, referred during a TV interview to "Romanian delinquency" (la délinquance roumaine), and called for a toughening of measures to combat crimes by Romanian minors and to increase cooperation with Romanian authorities to facilitate their return to Romania.

For further information:

France president urged not to stigmatize Roma and Travellers, 23 July 2010, AI News Story, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/france-president-urged-not-stigmatize-roma-and-travellers-2010-07-23>

France: France urged to end stigmatization of Roma and Travellers, AI Public Statement (Index: EUR 21/005/2010), 26 August 2010, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR21/005/2010/en>

France must heed EU call to end Roma discrimination, 10 September 2010, AI News Story, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/france-must-heed-eu-call-end-roma-discrimination-2010-09-10>

France must withdraw order targeting Roma for eviction, 13 September 2010, AI News Story, <http://www.amnesty.org/en/news-and-updates/france-must-withdraw-order-targeting-roma-eviction-2010-09-13>

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