

AI Index: PRE 01/395/2013
06 August 2013

Hungary: Murder convictions are 'wake-up call' over hate crimes against Roma

The Hungarian authorities must do more to protect minority groups from hate crimes, Amnesty International urged today after four people were found guilty over the racially motivated murders of six Roma in 2008 and 2009.

A Budapest court today handed life sentences to three of the convicted quartet, all known for supporting a far-right ideology, over a spate of attacks between March 2008 and August 2009 in the northeast of the country. The fourth man received 13 years in prison for collusion.

However, research by Amnesty International suggests hate crimes against Roma remain a serious concern in Hungary, while police lack the guidelines to thoroughly and effectively investigate them.

"Five years after these cold-blooded killings, Roma in Hungary still do not receive adequate protection from hate crimes," said Jezerca Tigani, Deputy Director for Europe and Central Asia Programme.

"This horrific case should have been a wake-up call about the continuous, often violent discrimination faced by the Roma community, but the perpetrators of such acts are still not being brought to justice."

The court found Zsolt Peto and brothers Arpad and Istvan Kiss guilty of carrying out nine attacks using firearms and Molotov cocktails targeting Romani houses in eight separate villages.

A fourth member of the group - Istvan Csontos, who acted as a driver - was also jailed.

Six people were killed and five injured in their year-long spree of violence, including a father and his four-year-old son who were shot dead as they tried to flee their home as it burned down. Another woman was shot dead in her sleep.

Amnesty International's research shows there is still a lack of support for victims of hate crimes, such as counselling and legal assistance.

Hungary's Criminal Code does not explicitly include hate crimes in murder cases, with judges instead granted discretion when ruling on offences committed against minority groups such as Roma. Statistical data showing the scale of these crimes is not collected.

"Today's verdict is a positive step, but Hungary has yet to learn the lessons from these killings. The authorities are still not doing enough to prevent and respond to violence against Roma," said Jezerca Tigani.

"The government needs to introduce new measures to tackle hate crimes, such as procedures that clearly outline how such crimes should be investigated, police officers trained to recognize and investigate hate

crimes and disaggregated data on hate crimes collected and made public."

Roma in Hungary are demonized by politicians and media, while communities continue to be harassed and attacked by far-right vigilante groups who march through their villages.

Far-right party Jobbik and several vigilante groups held a march in the village of Devecser in August 2012. They reportedly threw pieces of concrete and other missiles at Roma homes, with the police officers present failing to intervene.

The same month, a group dressed in black uniforms reportedly intimidated Romani residents in the village of Cegléd by chanting anti-Roma slogans and making death threats.

In March 2011, the village of Gyöngyöspata was patrolled by vigilante groups for almost a month after a Jobbik march.