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Stop forcible returns of Roma to Kosovo

European Union (EU) countries should end the forcible return of Roma and other minorities to Kosovo, Amnesty International said in a report published today.

[Not welcome anywhere: Stop the forcible return of Roma to Kosovo](#), details how Roma and members of other minority communities, including children, are forcibly returned to Kosovo often with nothing but the clothes they are wearing, to face the possibility of continuing discrimination and violence.

“EU countries risk violating international law by sending back people to places where they are at risk of persecution, or other serious harm. The EU should instead continue to provide international protection for Roma and other minorities in Kosovo until they can return there safely,” said Sian Jones, Amnesty International’s expert on Kosovo.

“The Kosovo authorities must also ensure that Roma and other minorities can return voluntarily and reintegrate fully in society.”

Many are picked up by the police in the early hours of the morning, and – with little time to gather their belongings – are often sent back with only the clothes they are wearing.

Few receive any assistance on their return to Kosovo, meaning many also face problems in obtaining access to education, healthcare, housing and social benefits.

Very few Roma are able to find work, with unemployment levels reaching 97 per cent. Roma communities are twice as likely as other ethnic groups to be amongst the 15 per cent of Kosovo’s population who live in extreme poverty.

Inter-ethnic violence continues while discrimination against Roma in Kosovo is widespread and systematic compounded by their perceived association with Kosovo Serbs. Largely Serbian-speaking and often living in Serbian areas of Kosovo, the Roma are still perceived to be allied with the Serbian community.

“Despite recent measures introduced by the Kosovo government aiming to improve conditions for reception and reintegration of returnees, the authorities do not have the funding, capacity, resources or political will to ensure a sustainable return for them,” said Sian Jones.

It has been estimated that around 50 per cent of forcible returnees will leave Kosovo again.

These forcible returns are taking place under bilateral agreements negotiated, or under negotiation, between the Kosovo authorities and European Union (EU) member states and Switzerland.

It has been reported that almost 10,000 Roma were legally obliged to leave the country and are therefore at risk of forcible return to Kosovo from Germany alone.

While genuinely voluntary returns must not be excluded, Amnesty International is concerned by reports that people agreed to go back only under the threat of forcible return.

“Until the Kosovo authorities are capable of ensuring the fundamental human rights of Roma and other minority communities, they will return to face a climate of violence and discrimination,” Sian Jones said.

“Until then, the international community is obliged to provide them with protection.”

Cases

Irfan had left Kosovo with his family in 1992 when he was five. In April 2010 police came without any warning at about 3.30 in the morning. They put him in handcuffs and took him to a minivan and transported him to Baden Baden airport. Irfan had no time to collect his belongings. He received 300 Euro from a non-governmental organization. At the airport border he was registered and received 50 Euro and a hotel room for two days. Back in Kosovo, he had moved in with his neighbour, and was attempting to make his family’s former dilapidated home in Plemetina habitable. He had cleared rubble from the building, but with no money to replace the doors and windows and to repair the roof, he asked Amnesty International, “What am I supposed to do?”

Twenty-year old Luli was forcibly returned from Germany in April 2010. He was woken by the police at night and given only ten minutes to get dressed and gather his belongings. He cannot speak Serbian or Albanian, and has only a basic grasp of Romanes, and was unable to communicate even with his older brother, who had been forcibly returned to Kosovo several years previously. Luli was two years old when he left Kosovo. He was given six months assistance with the rent of a flat and 350 Euro to buy what he needed. No one had offered him assistance to learn Serbian or Albanian.

Background

After the 1999 war in Kosovo, many Serbs and Roma fled to Serbia, others sought international protection in EU member states and Switzerland.

In March 2004, Serbs and Roma were again forced to flee Kosovo as inter-ethnic violence broke out between Albanians and Serbs, which also affected Roma communities.

Many of those now being forcibly returned also left Kosovo in early 1990s, when war broke out in what was then the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Following Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008, the Kosovo authorities have come under increasing pressure from EU member states to accept returnees.