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Ukraine: Swift, decisive action required to bring perpetrators of two fatal attacks against Roma to justice

Ukrainian authorities must act swiftly and decisively to bring to justice perpetrators of two fatal attacks against Roma. On 23 June, masked men armed with knives and other weapons raided a Roma camp in Lviv, which left one man dead and four injured, including a 10 year-old-boy. On 1 July, unidentified assailants stabbed and killed a 30-year-old Roma woman in Berehove, Zakarpattya region. Both attacks follow a surge in violence by far-right groups against Roma and other groups including women's rights activists, LGBTI people and journalists. The attacks have fuelled a climate of impunity as they have been largely unaddressed by the Ukrainian authorities.

Close to midnight on 23 June approximately 10 masked men wielding knives and hammers attacked a recently-erected Roma settlement on Truskavitska street in Lviv, western Ukraine. The attackers killed a 23-year-old man and injured two 19-year-old men, a 30-year-old woman and her 10-year-old child. The Roma called the police, who arrived shortly afterwards; they arrested seven alleged perpetrators and the alleged organiser of the attack.

On 1 July, a 30-year-old Roma woman was stabbed after dark near a railway crossing in Berehove. According to media reports, she managed to reach a nearby house as she sought help. The owner of the house called the emergency hotline but the woman died from her wounds. Early on 2 July, the local police in Zakarpattya region announced that they were investigating the case as a murder, adding that they had not yet established the identity of the perpetrators nor whether the killing constitutes a hate crime.

Amnesty International calls upon the police and the Prosecutor's Office in Lviv and Berehove to undertake a swift and effective investigation of these crimes and enact measures to prevent any such crimes in the future. In the current climate of rising xenophobia and far-right violence in Ukraine, a prompt, effective and impartial investigation of any such incident, and full transparency of its outcomes is important not only to achieve justice for victims, but also to send a clear signal to Ukrainian society that these types of crimes are completely unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

2017 and 2018 have seen a surge in violent incidents and hate crimes in Ukraine perpetrated by members of far-right organisations. Members of the C14, Traditsii i Poryadok, Natsionalni Druzhyny and, Karpatska Sich groups, amongst others, have violently disrupted dozens of peaceful public events, discussions and other gatherings

organised by those they brand as enemies of Ukraine – including women's rights activists, LGBTI people, journalists and Roma. Following the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014 and the conflict with Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine, Ukrainian society has become deeply polarised. Far-right groups have exploited this tense environment by promoting and committing acts of hatred and discrimination.

Most crimes committed by far-right groups have not been addressed by Ukrainian authorities, who appear unwilling or unable to conduct effective investigations even when the far-right groups have publicly acknowledged responsibility. Among cases monitored by Amnesty International only an investigation into the attack against an LGBTI event in the eastern Ukrainian city of Zaporizhzhya in August 2017 has reached the courts. Investigations concerning more than 30 other attacks have not progressed past the initial complaint registration stage. In addition, when investigations have been initiated into hate crimes, authorities rarely investigate the discriminatory motives behind the crimes. Victims are seldom informed about the progress of investigations, leaving them with the impression that nothing has been done. No Ukrainian public official has publicly condemned the surge of violence by far-right groups.

Alleged perpetrators of the 23 June attack are members of the “Tvereza i zla molod” (Sober and Angry Youth) group. According to Oksana Sanagurskaya of the human rights department of the Lviv Police, who spoke to the news website Zaborona.com, this group has only recently emerged. The group has posted neo-nazi slogans and pictures on its Telegram and YouTube channels, including undated videos of harassment and intimidation of Roma. These videos were deleted further to the 23 June attack on the Roma settlement.

All those arrested are minors with the exception of a 20-year-old male, identified by the Lviv police as the alleged organiser. The Prosecutor's Office in Lviv also announced that a total of 14 people are wanted in connection with the attack; six of them are still at large. All are being investigated for committing premeditated murder by a group of people, hooliganism, hate crime and involving minors in criminal activities (Articles 115 Part 2; 161; 296 and 304 of the Ukrainian Criminal Code). At the time of writing, the investigation is still ongoing. In his latest public pronouncement on the matter, the head of the Ukrainian Security Service, Vasyl Hrytsak, alleged that Russia or some Russia-based group was complicit in the attack, but did not clarify or support these claims. There have been a number of instances when senior Ukrainian officials including Vasyl Hrytsak have alleged that Russia was responsible for, or complicit of, crimes in Ukraine or spreading false claims about events in Ukraine.

Amnesty International commends the arrest of the alleged perpetrators of the fatal pogrom against Roma as a welcome first step. It further calls upon authorities to demonstrate real commitment to the investigation by making it as transparent as possible and fully investigating the discriminatory motives behind the crimes – certainly not the case in the past. It is the duty of the Ukrainian authorities to publicly and unequivocally condemn this kind of attack as a measure to prevent future incidents. The organisation warns that leaving hate crimes unanswered in a country living with war trauma is critically dangerous to its present and future, and urges a full, timely, independent and effective investigation of this and all previous similar incidents.

BACKGROUND:

On 21 April members of the far-right group C14 attacked a Roma camp in the Holoseevo District of Kyiv, burning down their tents and, armed with knives and hammers, chasing residents including women and children. C14 boasted about the attack on their Facebook page and one of its leaders warned of further pogroms.

On 9 May, approximately 30 masked men burnt down a Roma settlement in Rudne, near Lviv, chasing away its inhabitants. One day later the Lviv Hotline, a complaints service run by the local administration, stated on its Facebook page that local authorities had cleaned the territory of the Roma camp. The clean-up allegedly occurred after police had spoken with the Roma inhabitants, who reportedly stated that they had decided to leave the camp. Activists believe that this sequence of events points to the need to meaningfully investigate the involvement of government officials in the pogrom against the Roma settlement.

On 14 June, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Freedom House and Front Line Defenders sent a joint letter to the Minister of Interior of Ukraine and the General Prosecutor of Ukraine, highlighting these and other incidents of violence by far-right groups. The organisations urged them to publicly condemn and effectively address attacks against and intimidation of groups that promote hatred and violence. To date, neither official has provided a public comment nor acted to address the attacks.

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