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EXTERNAL

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BULGARIA**Racial attacks against the Roma community of Dolno Belotintsi**

Amnesty International's Concern: Amnesty International is concerned about reports of racially motivated attacks on the Roma in Dolno Belotintsi which started on 25 February 1994 and have continued sporadically ever since. Amnesty International is particularly concerned because, according to these reports, most of the Roma community were forced to abandon their homes and flee from the village after the authorities failed adequately to protect them.

Background: The attacks and harassment of the Roma community of Dolno Belotintsi reportedly began on 25 February 1994 after a soldier, who had deserted from his unit, robbed and murdered Piarvan Geraskov, a 70-year-old resident of the village. The soldier, who is a Rom, was caught by the villagers and handed over to the police.

That evening a series of attacks against Roma homes began in order to force the Roma community, numbering around 20 families, to leave the village. Roma homes were broken into, the windows were smashed and furniture and other household belongings were deliberately destroyed. Many of the homes broken into were empty at the time, their inhabitants having fled in fear. Later in the night a group of men from the village, armed with guns, knives, axes, pitch forks and stakes, forced around 30 Roma to leave their homes and ordered them to march to Nikolovo, a village some three kilometres away, and back. The majority of the Roma forced on this march were women with children and elderly people who had not fled from the village. One of them, Vania Nikolova, marched together with her 10-day-old baby. During the march they were insulted with racist slurs, threatened that they would be thrown off the bridge and some of the women were threatened with sexual assaults.

The attacks continued with the same intensity for the next two days. During the night of 26 February the house of Miron Simeonov Metodiev was burned down. Among the homes which were attacked and suffered damage during this period were those of Zlatka Krumova, Petrana Spasova, Kamen Milchev, Veselin Kamenov, Blaga Ilieva, Mihail Velichkov and Rabia Mihailova.

On 27 February 1994, at the funeral of Piarvan Geraskov, some people among the mourners shouted: "Death to Gypsies!" and a village meeting was convened that evening at the square. Gencho Petrov Kolev, the village mayor, and other villagers spoke at the meeting about the Roma in general terms and how the village was victimized by a growing rate of crimes committed by members of the Roma community. Emil Makaveev reportedly spoke holding a knife in front of the microphone, saying: "No Gypsy will leave the village alive." Again cries of "Death to the Gypsies!" were repeated. A letter was sent from the meeting to the President of the Republic demanding that the Gypsies of Dolno Belotintsi be expelled from the village as well as the lifting of the moratorium on the carrying out of death penalty. Only three of around 20 Roma families were given permission to remain in the village. It was decided that the others would be expelled.

The victims of the forced march and the attacks filed complaints and reportedly failed to receive protection from the Regional Police Department and the County Prosecutor. A local police officer, stationed in the village, claimed that he had not been present there during the nights of 25 and 27 February, when the forced march and the village meeting took place. The officer also reportedly said that during the other attacks on Roma homes, which he had witnessed, he had called the Regional Police Department for reinforcements but was not sent any and had been afraid to intervene by himself. As a result of these attacks most of the Roma have fled the village and live with relatives or friends in the neighbouring villages.

Amnesty International believes that the alleged lack of adequate protection from racial violence for the Roma community in Dolno Belotintsi represents a flagrant violation of the international human rights standards to which Bulgaria is a party. Article 2, paragraph 1, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights states that each State Party undertakes to respect and to ensure to all individuals within its territory and subject to its jurisdiction the rights recognized in the Covenant, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status.

Amnesty International has urged the Bulgarian authorities to initiate a prompt, thorough and independent inquiry into the incidents in Dolno Belotintsi, to make public its findings and to bring to justice any persons found responsible.

Amnesty International also asked to be informed as to what measures the Bulgarian authorities have taken to ensure that members of the Roma community who were forced to leave Dolno Belotintsi can return safely to their homes.