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The rights of the European Roma

International Roma Day (April 8) is a chance to celebrate Romani culture but also to highlight the persecution and discrimination that Roma people face in all areas of life.

“Stereotyping and negative perceptions of Roma people, embedded by some media and parts of the European public opinion feed discrimination in all spheres of life,” said Jezerca Tigani, Europe and Central Asia Deputy Programme Director.

“Governments must set the example and challenge social prejudices that foster discrimination against the Roma and ensure their equality. Instead, only too often governments neglect their responsibilities to their Roma citizens to the detriment of all.”

Numbering between 10 and 12 million people, the Roma are one of Europe’s largest and most disadvantaged minorities.

“International Roma Day means nothing if governments fail to guarantee basic rights to Roma” said Jezerca Tigani.

Even as events to mark this important annual event take place, Roma living in Belvil, an informal settlement in Belgrade, Serbia, will spend International Roma Day under the threat of forced eviction.

They were told two weeks ago about the eviction, but have no information about where they will go or what will happen to them.

Yet, a year ago on International Roma Day in 2011, the same Belvil residents were told by the City of Belgrade authorities that they would be resettled in prefabricated houses in settlements around the city. 12 months on, these promises have come to nothing

"This has been a really hard year for Roma in Belgrade, with more than eight forced evictions since last April " said Jezerca Tigani.

"The Serbian government continues to deny Roma the right to adequate housing – as they have done since April 2009, when Roma evicted from another informal settlement near Belvil, and spent International Roma Day, homeless on the side of the road.”

In Romania, 76 families, the majority Roma, have to live with the consequences of eviction. They were forcibly evicted from Coastei Street in the centre of the city of Cluj-Napoca in December 2010, and relocated on the outskirts of the city, where they live in overcrowded rooms next to a garbage dump and a former dump for chemical waste. Some of the Romani families were left homeless in the middle of the winter. For over a year they have been fighting for justice.

“We were already socially integrated when living in Coastei Street, we used to have jobs, the children

went to high school, we had decent living standards, we had access to the park, etc. Here, by the garbage dump, we feel like in a ghetto, we feel discriminated against from all points of view,” evicted Roma people told Amnesty International.

Millions of other Roma live in informal settlements, without adequate housing and often without access to running water or electricity. They are at greater risk of illness, but less able to access the health care they need.

In some countries Romani children are often placed in special schools designed for pupils with “mild mental disabilities” or segregated in separate schools and classes that offer an inferior education. In turn, they are severely disadvantaged in the labour market.

Unable to find jobs millions of Roma cannot access better housing, afford medication, or pay the costs of their children’s schooling.

Socially marginalized, the Roma are also politically excluded.

The cycle continues, aggravated by the discrimination that is routinely denying the Roma equal opportunity, equal treatment and the full enjoyment of all their human rights.

Racially motivated violence against Roma is becoming an alarming trend in recent years, with isolated assaults or vigilante attacks targeting Roma settlements or communities.

Following a march attended by up to 2,000 people in the village of Gyöngyöspata by the far-right party Jobbik on 6 March 2011 three vigilante groups patrolled the village for almost a month. During this time, they were threatening, intimidating and harassing Romani residents. The Hungarian authorities failed to react adequately and prevent the abuses.

Instead of counteracting stereotypes and prejudices that fuel intolerance and hatred towards Roma, some governments and public officials actually strengthen them in their public discourse.

“It is time for governments in Europe to honour their obligations and protect their Roma citizens by ending discriminatory policies and practices that violate the human rights of Roma and keep them in a cycle of poverty and marginalization,” said Jezerca Tigani.