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Kosovo: Investigate Attacks on Roma

(Brussels) – Kosovo and international authorities should act in concert to halt the recent wave of attacks and harassment targeting Roma communities, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International said today. The action should include both speedy investigations leading to identification and prosecution of the perpetrators and measures to prevent any future attacks.

The attacks were initially reported in the Kosovo Roma media in mid-August, 2009. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, in cooperation with Roma nongovernmental organizations, have worked since then to document the incidents and the responses made by the authorities.

“These incidents underscore how vulnerable the Roma in Kosovo remain,” said Wanda Troszczynska-van Genderen, Western Balkans researcher at Human Rights Watch. “The only way to stop these attacks is for both Kosovo and international police and prosecutors to make it clear that they will bring the perpetrators to justice.”

A Roma language television program (Yekhipe) on Radio Television Kosovo, the state broadcaster, reported on August 13 that a flurry of attacks against Roma by ethnic Albanians took place in Gnjilane (Gjilan) in the last week of July. At least four Roma, including a community leader, were physically assaulted and injured in separate incidents, the program reported. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) Mission in Kosovo said that the victims had reported the assaults to the police and that investigations have been opened.

The Yekhipe program reported that additional attacks had taken place at that time but that they were not reported to the police because the victims feared retaliation. Sources at the OSCE Mission in Kosovo also confirmed a burglary of a Roma house in Gnjilane the same week.

Another series of episodes was reported on August 25, when 20 Roma families from the Halit Ibishi neighborhood in the town of Urosevac (Ferizaj) submitted a petition to the Urosevac Municipal Community Office saying that the families had been verbally and physically harassed on a number of occasions between August 17 and 22 by “unknown perpetrators.” They sought protection from the Kosovo Police Service (KPS) and the municipal authorities. The police are investigating the allegations.

International organizations mandated to monitor security and conditions for minorities in Kosovo -- including the UN mission in Kosovo, UNMIK; the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR; OSCE; and the EU rule of law mission in Kosovo, EULEX – initially did not respond to the reports. The organizations have since been looking into the incidents, and that they currently lack sufficient information to determine whether they were ethnically motivated.

Kosovo and local police in Gnjilane and Urosevac have reportedly increased patrols in tense areas in response to the incidents. But no arrests have been made and neither the Kosovo government nor international authorities in Kosovo have issued any official statements condemning the attacks.

"It is not enough to react when an incident occurs," said Sian Jones, Balkans Researcher at Amnesty International. "A proactive response is needed, including expanded police patrols, to protect the rights of the Roma community, as well as outreach to these communities to encourage people to report incidents to the police, who should promptly and impartially investigate all such allegations."

Over the last decade, the Kosovo and international authorities have routinely failed to protect minority communities from violence and intimidation. This has left the Roma vulnerable to repeated attacks, including a series of ethnically motivated attacks in March 2004.

Human Rights Watch has documented these shortcomings in its reports, including "Not on the Agenda: The Continuing Failure to Address Accountability in Kosovo Post-March 2004"

<http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2006/05/29/not-agenda-0> and "Kosovo Criminal Justice Scorecard"

<http://www.hrw.org/en/reports/2008/03/27/kosovo-criminal-justice-scorecard-0>. See also Amnesty International's Annual Report 2009: Serbia, including Kosovo,

<http://report2009.amnesty.org/en/regions/europe-central-asia-serbia>

For more of Human Rights Watch's work on Kosovo, please visit:

http://www.hrw.org/special_focus/list/872

For more of Amnesty International's work on Kosovo, please visit:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/region-serbia>

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