

Greece

Preparing for the Olympic Games: Evicting the Roma

Amnesty International is concerned that the social and economic rights, particularly the right to adequate housing, of a group of Romani families who were evicted from their homes in the vicinity of the Olympic Stadium construction site are being eroded due to the failure of the Greek authorities to uphold an agreement to subsidize their rent in alternative accommodation.

On 1 August 2002, as part of the ongoing preparations in the Athens suburb of Maroussi for the 2004 Olympic Games, Panagiotis Tzanikos, the Mayor of Maroussi, and Stelios Kalamiotis, a representative of a group of 50 Romani families, some of whom had been living close to the site for over 30 years, signed an agreement which stipulated that the families would leave their homes on condition they would receive subsidies to help them rent new accommodation. This was to be a temporary measure, as under the terms of the agreement, the Municipality of Maroussi also undertook to find a plot of land and relocate the Roma in heavy-duty prefabricated houses, while undertaking to work towards their permanent re-housing in houses/ apartments. It should also be noted that the agreement was not extended to encompass Albanian Roma legally residing in Greece, who some years ago proceeded to set up a settlement next to the one where the Greek Roma were living. The main motive behind the agreement was the necessity to vacate the plot of land where the Roma had been living, in order for a road to be widened and for a parking lot for the adjacent Olympic stadium to be built.

The agreement, which affects a total of 137 people, guaranteed a monthly payment for each family with payments varying according to family size. Shortly afterwards the families moved into rented accommodation or into accommodation that other members of their wider family group had rented. However there are reports that by October 2002 they had already begun making complaints that they were not receiving payments, or that the payments were erratic. Some families allege that they faced discrimination whilst looking for new accommodation and when they did finally find a house to rent they would lose it through lack of funds, caused by the non-punctual payment of the rent subsidies by the Maroussi Municipality. This prompted the Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM), a local human rights organization, to file a criminal complaint report with the Athens Misdemeanours Prosecutor's Office who ordered the launching of two preliminary inquiries into the allegations. Both Roma and GHM members have been called to testify.

One man who has been evicted is Prokopis Nikolaou, who has two young sons and a baby daughter. To support his family, he sells seasonal fruit and vegetables, holly at Christmas time or scrap metal. Since being evicted from the settlement, Prokopis must find money every month to cover his share of the rent, water and electricity. He also shares his new house with his mother and father-in-law, his sister-in-law and her two small children, and other friends or relatives in need of a place to stay. Prokopis has become a de facto representative of the group

of families; with the assistance of GHM he writes letters to newspapers about their situation, goes regularly to the Mayor's office to fight for the money they are owed, and has testified before the judicial officer conducting a preliminary inquiry into the issue of non-punctual payments of the subsidies. He has also given numerous interviews to Greek and foreign media, highlighting the problems the Roma face due to the non-implementation of the agreement by the Mayor of Maroussi. Indeed, the Mayor himself has admitted that there have been considerable delays in the payments of the monthly rent subsidies. Thus, according to a letter from the Mayor of Maroussi to the Greek Ombudsman's Office, dated 19 February 2004, only 14 families had been paid by (and including) January 2004; the remaining 36 families had not been paid since November 2003.¹ In the same letter, the Mayor noted that the main reason behind these delays was the fact that the Ministry of Interior (which was not a signatory to the agreement) had not provided him with the necessary funds. The Mayor of Maroussi noted that he should be in a position "soon" to inform the Roma as to the plot of land where they would be relocated. Furthermore, he stated that the Roma should proceed to file applications for a special loan scheme for Greek Roma. The mayor would reportedly then use the money to build houses for the Roma. The mayor also undertook to pay off the loans the Roma would be granted.

Nevertheless, the Mayor of Maroussi proceeded effectively to blackmail the Roma, informing them that no further subsidies would be forthcoming until all the families filed loan applications. This condition, which was not included in the contract, was imposed arbitrarily by the Mayor. It should be noted that the Mayor imposed this condition even before the Maroussi Municipal Council and the state Auditor's Board approved it. Furthermore, the Roma are concerned that the only guarantee they would receive would be a document from the Mayor to the effect that the Municipality would pay the loan on their behalf. In other words, the Mayor is effectively calling upon the Roma to shoulder a significant economic burden without being certain as to whether it will be illegal for the municipality to pay back the loans on behalf of the Roma. In addition, the Mayor has not yet informed the Roma as to where they will be relocated. According to unofficial information, the Mayor of Maroussi is not making any efforts to locate such a plot of land. As a result, he will not be able to use a sum of 880,410 Euros, earmarked by the Ministry of Interior for this purpose.²

Despite the families' persistence, and the intervention of local NGOs, the Greek Ombudsman, and the former Deputy Minister of the Interior, the Mayor has so far failed to honour his commitments, and the competent authorities have failed to intervene, leaving some families unable to afford rent elsewhere. Amnesty International is concerned at reports that two preliminary inquiries into this case have been concluded by the Athens Misdemeanours

1 It appears, however, that either shortly after or before this letter was drafted, all Roma were paid the economic subsidies owed to them until (and including) December 2003.

2 In his Letter to the Greek Ombudsman's Office, dated 29 January 2004, Ref. No. 5698, the then Deputy Minister for Interior, Mr. Lampros Papadimas noted that the sum of 880,410 euros would be allocated to the Municipality of Maroussi following the submission by the latter of its proposed relocation site.

Prosecutor, but that there has been a delay in assigning the case to prosecutors. As of 16 June 2004, one of the inquiries has been assigned to the Prosecutor's office.

The only positive development so far has been the partial payment, in mid-June 2004, of the subsidies owed to the Roma. More specifically, the Municipality of Maroussi paid all the Romani families the subsidies for three months and has promised to pay the outstanding subsidies either in late June or in early July.

Amnesty International notes that there has been increased international awareness of and concern about this issue. Thus, in the UN Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights' Concluding Observations on Greece's initial report, it is stated that:

The State party is also requested to provide, in its second periodic report, detailed information on the number of Roma evicted from their homes, especially in the context of the 2004 Olympic Games, and on any measures taken to remedy illegal acts which may have occurred in that regard.³

Furthermore, on 8 June, 2004, the Council of Europe's European Commission against Racism and Intolerance made public its *Third Report on Greece*, in which it criticized the Greek central administration and local authorities alike for not making all efforts necessary to improve the living conditions of Roma in Greece.⁴ Furthermore, it should also be noted that the case of the Maroussi Romani community is also featured in the Collective Complaint lodged by the European Roma Rights Centre on 4 April, 2003 before the European Social Charter's Social Rights Committee. A hearing into the complaint has been scheduled for 6 September 2004.⁵

Amnesty International is concerned that the Greek authorities, by evicting Roma from their settlement and failing to facilitate their move to alternative appropriate accommodation, are acting in violation of Article 1.1 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights⁶ which Greece has signed and ratified and which states: "The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions." Such evictions also contravene objective 3.c.a of the Integrated Action Plan for the Social Integration of the Greek Gypsies⁷, which states that "it is

3 See UN CESCR, *Concluding Observations: Greece*. E/C.12/1/Add.97, 14 May 2004, paragraph 43. (no link yet)

4 See ECRI's *Third Report on Greece*, CRI(2004) 24, adopted on 5 December 2003 and made public on 8 June 2004, paragraphs 70-73, available at http://www.coe.int/T/E/Human_Rights/Ecri/1-ECRI/2-Country-by-country_approach/Greece/Greece_CBC_3.asp#TopOfPage

5 Collective Complaint No 15/2003, European Roma Rights Center against Greece, declared admissible on June 16, 2003. See http://www.coe.int/T/E/Human_Rights/Esc/5_Collective_complaints/List_of_collective_complaints/01_List_%20of_complaints.asp#TopOfPage

6 <http://www.ishr.ch/About%20UN/Instruments/icescr.htm#Top>

7 http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/news/2001/jun/napincl_2003_greece_en.pdf

anticipated that by the end of 2005 no Greek Roma will be living in tents or makeshift accommodation”.

