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France president urged not to stigmatize Roma and Travellers

Amnesty International is calling on French President Nicolas Sarkozy to work to combat discrimination against Roma and Travellers (Gens du Voyage) in France ahead of a meeting to discuss “problems” relating to their “behaviour”.

On Wednesday, the French leader said he would hold a special meeting next week to discuss “problems related to the behaviour of certain Roma and Travellers in France and “to decide on the closure of all irregular camps”.

President Sarkozy’s announcement came after violent protests by Travellers in Saint-Aignan, in the Loire Valley, sparked by the police shooting of a young male Traveller in the passenger seat of a car that reportedly refused to stop when requested to do so.

“We are troubled that the President of France’s reaction to a quite specific set of incidents would appear target, and perpetuate negative stereotypes about, Roma and Travellers in general.”

The French authorities should be looking instead to combat the long-standing legal and societal discrimination that they face, while ensuring thorough and impartial investigations into both the circumstances of the shooting and any offences committed in response,” said David Diaz-Jogeix.

Around 400,000 itinerant French Travellers are already subject to discriminatory requirements to report periodically to the police and to be registered with a municipality for three years before acquiring the right to vote.

Travellers also face a shortage of authorized halting sites enabling them to maintain their traditional lifestyles and professions.

Around 20,000 Roma from Eastern and Central Europe are currently estimated to be residing in France, many of them in unauthorised camps.

Amnesty International also urged the French authorities to respect international law during any evictions of Roma or Travellers.

Evictions, even from unlawful settlements, should only take place after all other alternatives have been exhausted, following consultations with all affected residents, and the offer of adequate alternative accommodation.

“No-one should be left homeless as a result of an eviction and evictions must on no account be carried out in

order to encourage migrants to leave the country,” said David Diaz-Jogeix.