

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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France urged to end stigmatization of Roma and Travellers

Amnesty International today expressed deep concern about recent statements and measures taken by the French authorities that appear to target Roma and Travellers. The organization is troubled that some Roma are being returned from France to their countries of origin in a context of statements by the French government suggesting links between Roma and criminality.

86 Roma were already returned to Romania and Bulgaria on 19 August and around 130 the following day. The French Minister of immigration Eric Besson has announced that around 250 Roma would be returned today, and that around 800 Roma would be returned by the end of this month.

The measures followed the announcement by the French government that around 300 irregular camps inhabited by Roma and Travellers would be closed within three months, following a ministerial meeting on 28 July to discuss "the problems posed by the behaviour of certain Travellers and Roma". During that meeting, President Sarkozy reportedly referred to irregular camps inhabited by Roma as "sources" of criminality, allegedly including child exploitation and prostitution. The organization is alarmed that such statements were made by the President of the French Republic, as they could perpetuate negative stereotypes which contribute to the stigmatization of and discrimination against Roma and Travellers.

Amnesty International considers that French officials should be working to fight discrimination, rather than making inflammatory statements linking entire communities to alleged criminality. The organization is concerned that such statements may lead to even further discrimination against Roma and Travellers. No one should be returned or expelled simply because they are Roma.

Amnesty International welcomes the statement by the European Union Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship Viviane Reding on 25 August on the Roma situation in Europe. Commissioner Reding regretted that "some of the rhetoric that has been used in some Member States in the past weeks has been openly discriminatory and partly inflammatory".

Members of France's Traveller communities, the majority of whom are French citizens, have also been targeted by the announcement to close 300 irregular camps.

Under French law, all municipalities (communes) with more than 5,000 inhabitants must establish authorized halting sites for Travellers. However, in April 2009 the government was criticized by the French Equal Opportunities and Anti-Discrimination Commission (HALDE) as only 25 per cent of the municipalities under that obligation had done so. The HALDE stressed that the State's failure to fulfil its obligation resulted in an increase of the number of Travellers living in unauthorized halting sites.

Amnesty International is calling on the French authorities to focus on fully implementing its own legislation and provide adequate halting sites and protection of the housing rights of all.

The organization also reminds the French authorities of their obligations under international human rights law to guarantee the rights of all persons, including Roma and Travellers, to adequate housing. The French authorities cannot evict anyone from their home, even if it is in an irregular settlement, unless all other alternatives have been exhausted and they have consulted all affected residents. Evictions can only be carried out when appropriate procedural protections are in place; adequate alternative accommodation must be provided; and relocated residents must be offered compensation for all losses.

Amnesty International also urges France to remove any provisions of French law which are discriminatory against Travellers, such as requiring them to carry travel permits and restricting their voting rights.

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