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Europe: Discrimination against Roma

2005 marks the start of the Decade of Roma Inclusion - an initiative of eight countries in Central and Eastern Europe, and supported by the international community. The goal of the decade is to improve the social and economic status of Roma by focusing on assistance in education, employment, health and housing.

There are estimated seven to nine million Roma living in Europe today with 80 percent of them living in new European Union (EU) member states and candidate countries. The level of income and unemployment is considerably lower for the Roma minorities across the region. According to the World Bank, in Hungary the poverty rate is about five times greater among Roma than among non-Roma.

Over the years Amnesty International had been particularly concerned about allegations of torture and ill-treatment of Roma by law enforcement agents as well as about incidents of racist violence in which the Roma had not been adequately protected. The organization published its latest findings in *Europe and Central Asia: Summary of Amnesty International's Concerns in the Region, January - June 2004* (AI Index: EUR 01/005/2004 <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engeur010052004>).

Amnesty International has recorded the following findings in the first 6 months of 2004:

Bulgaria

An increased number of racist assaults on Roma in Sofia in the period under review was reported.

On 30 April, Georgi Angelov was reportedly brutally beaten by two men who cut off his ear with a razor blade. This and similar incidents were reportedly not effectively investigated. Local human rights organizations have called for better policing in Romani neighbourhoods and known meeting-places of skinheads.

On 16 January Assen Zarev from the *Fakulteta* neighbourhood in the capital was reportedly beaten by police officers near his house who threatened to shoot him if he did not give information about the whereabouts of some men suspected of cutting down a tree in the near-by woods. Assen Zarev later obtained a forensic medical certificate, describing injuries consistent with the allegations of ill-treatment.

A second incident in this neighbourhood of Sofia took place on 20 January, when 16 officers carried out a search of some houses and reportedly indiscriminately arrested and verbally abused 17 men. In the course of their action the police reportedly forced their way into three houses which were unoccupied at the time and broke windows and damaged the furniture and household appliances.

The Sofia Regional Prosecutor has reportedly initiated an investigation into the ill-treatment complaint of Assen Zarev and the police action of 20 January.

Czech Republic

In January, three youths were convicted by the court in Jeseník to a suspended sentence of three years' imprisonment for assaulting a Romani couple in their home on 28 June 2003. They came to the home of the Ziga family and ordered them to open the door, saying that they were police officers. When Lydie Zigovalová, who was 21 and pregnant, opened the door she was hit in the face with a cobblestone, and, as a result, permanently lost sight in the injured eye. Jan Ziga was assaulted with a broken bottle and suffered cuts to his face and chest.

On 3 March, two of the convicted youths assaulted Lukas Tokar, a young Romani man with a mental disability, at a bus station. Tokar was later taken to a hospital where he received treatment for a broken nose. Police subsequently detained the youths, who were reportedly charged in connection with the assault.

On 14 April, Martin Stiskala assaulted a 19-year-old Romani man in front of a restaurant in Jeseník. Stiskala began by shouting racist insults and spitting on the ground. He then reportedly pushed to the ground and kicked the Romani youth who managed to hold Stiskala until the police arrived and detained him. The Jeseník district court reportedly sentenced Stiskala on 8 June to a two-year suspended sentence for a racially motivated assault.

Greece

Amnesty International is concerned about police impunity. Investigations of police brutality against Roma youths were assigned to the same police departments whose staff were alleged to have committed offences.

Amnesty International expressed its concern that the Greek authorities about the accommodation and livelihood of Roma families who were evicted from three locations in Athens designated for transformation into Olympic Games facilities. The authorities had failed to facilitate their move to alternative accommodation, thus violating the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which Greece has signed and ratified.

Romania

On 11 March Bela Dodi and four other Romani men were collecting scrap metal in the Coroiesti mine in Vulcan, in Hunedoara county when private security guards assaulted them. They reportedly severely beat four men, while Bela Dodi, running in an attempt to escape from the guards, fell to the ground, hit his head and died as a result. An investigation into the death of Bela Dodi and the ill-treatment of four other men has reportedly been initiated.

Russia

In May, St Petersburg police launched an operation targeting Roma which Amnesty International feared could lead to violations of their human rights, and in Obukhovo, St Petersburg region, Romani huts in a spontaneous settlement were allegedly burnt down by police.

Threats of skinhead attacks in Pskov region in north-western Russia reportedly forced Roma to leave their homes due to alleged police failure to protect them.

Slovakia

In February protests by members of the Roma minority in Eastern Slovakia, which were reportedly sparked off by changes in the social welfare policy, escalated in some instances into rioting and looting. Although Amnesty International does not condone violence, it was concerned about reports that in some instances police officers resorted to excessive use of force, verbal racist abuse and even to deliberate ill-treatment. They reportedly beat with truncheons, prodded with electric batons, kicked and otherwise physically assaulted men, women and children, irrespective of their age or physical and/or mental condition. Some of the officers reportedly addressed racist insults to the victims. At least 26 people were detained and taken into custody where they were reportedly subjected to beatings and degrading treatment.

On 25 February in Caklov, police came to arrest a number of women who were suspected of having stolen food from the state-owned store in the town. The police officers reportedly chased after the alleged suspects wielding their truncheons in a threatening manner, with an officer reportedly hitting three-year-old G. G. on the head. The boy later received medical treatment and the police officer

involved returned to the settlement to apologize to the family for his conduct. Twenty-three women and two men were arrested on 25 February, and a further fourteen women were arrested the following day. During the arrests some of the officers reportedly called the suspects "whore", "dirty gypsy" and other racist insults.

In the first six months of 2004, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) published reports on a number of countries examining racism, xenophobia, anti-Semitism and intolerance. In its third report on **Bulgaria**, the Commission concluded that there were still stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination against minority groups, particularly Roma, as well as against immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers. ECRI also highlighted the problem of segregation of Roma children in schools. In its report on the **Czech Republic** ECRI welcomed the government efforts to fight against racial discrimination, specifically noting the national plan for the integration of Roma into society. However, ECRI was concerned that a number of recommendations made in its previous report had not been implemented, particularly in combating discrimination and inequality at the local level. In **Hungary**, ECRI assessed that the Roma minority continues to be "severely disadvantaged in most areas of life, particularly in the fields of health care, housing, employment and education". The Roma minority in **Slovakia**, according to ECRI "remains severely disadvantaged in most areas of life, particularly in the fields of housing, employment and education". ECRI made extensive recommendations to the authorities and, *inter alia*, appealed "for a full, transparent and impartial investigation into the recent allegations concerning sterilisations of Roma women without their full and informed consent".

During the same period, the UN Committee Against Torture considered **Bulgaria's** third periodic report under the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment. The Committee, among others things, expressed concern about "numerous allegations of ill-treatment of persons in custody that may amount to torture, in particular during police interviews, which disproportionately affect the Roma and the lack of an independent system to investigate complaints, and that allegations of ill-treatment are not always investigated promptly and impartially..." After considering the **Czech Republic's** third report, the UN Committee expressed concern about "the persistent occurrence of acts of violence against Roma and the alleged reluctance on the part of the Police to provide adequate protection and to investigate such crimes, despite efforts made by the State party to counter such acts".

See also: <http://news.amnesty.org/index/ENGEUR0129042004>

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