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## **Serbia urged to stop forced evictions of Roma**

*The authorities act as if it was our fault that we live in the settlements, that it is our choice. What other choice have we got? If you are Roma you haven't got many choices.*

A Romani woman speaking to Amnesty International in August 2010

The Serbian authorities must halt forced evictions of Roma in the capital Belgrade and provide them with adequate housing, Amnesty International said on the eve of International Roma Day.

A new report, *Home is more than a roof over your head: Roma denied adequate housing in Serbia*, documents an increasing series of forced evictions of Roma since April 2009 that has left some housed in metal containers in segregated settlements and others returned to living in poverty in southern Serbia, often to inadequate housing.

“Instead of halting forced evictions the Serbian authorities in Belgrade are carrying out more and more, driving Roma communities from their homes and forcing them to live in inadequate housing,” said Sian Jones, Amnesty International’s Serbia researcher.

“They must stop this practice if they are to abide by their international obligations. This includes guaranteeing Roma the right to housing provided with sanitation, within reach of public facilities and employment and secure from future forced evictions.”

Since April 2009 at least seven forced evictions of informal settlements have taken place.

At the end of March 2010, 20-25 families were evicted from an informal settlement in the Čukarica area of the capital.

The following month, about 38 Romani families were evicted from an informal settlement in the same area, and then subsequently sent back to southern Serbia.

Roma living at another site in Čukarica remain at risk of forced eviction. In October and December 2010, another 62 people were evicted from different parts of New Belgrade.

The planned “resettlement” in early 2011 of the residents of a settlement at Belvil in Novi Beograd (New Belgrade) was temporarily suspended following pressure from various organisations.

Many of the forced evictions are part of a 2009 City of Belgrade Assembly plan envisaging large scale infrastructure projects funded by loans from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the European Investment Bank.

The plans are set to affect the residents of at least 50 of the 100 Roma settlements within the City of Belgrade.

Denied the right to adequate housing, around a third of Belgrade’s Roma population have no option but to live in informal settlements, where they have no regular water supply, no sanitation and other basic services.

Unable to register as citizens of Belgrade, they are often denied access to employment, social security, health care and education.

Roma disproportionately – almost exclusively – make up the population of informal settlements across Serbia.

Within these communities, there are many vulnerable groups, including Roma who fled the 1999 war in Kosovo. Other Roma who have sought work or international protection in west European countries, and are now being forcibly returned to Serbia, also end up living in these informal settlements.

“Authorities in Serbia must ensure that Roma communities are consulted on any proposals, or possible options for resettlement, and given the opportunity to propose alternatives, should they wish to do so,” Sian Jones said.

“The authorities should also identify social housing and other housing options in locations not segregated by ethnicity to ensure that Roma families have the choice of housing outside Roma only-settlements.”

In its report Amnesty International makes a series of recommendations to the Serbian authorities to prevent evictions in breach of international standards in the future, and to ensure the right to adequate housing for Roma, including:

- Stop all forced evictions, and guarantee that infrastructure projects do not result in any further forced evictions;
- Ensure that the eviction of the Belvil settlement, and any further evictions in Belgrade are carried out according to international standards, as reflected in the UN Basic Principles and guidelines on Development-Based Evictions;
- Ensure evicted Roma access to effective legal remedies including compensation and adequate alternative accommodation;
- Establish a legal framework to prohibit forced evictions and ensure that any further resettlements by the City of Belgrade do not constitute forced evictions.

## **Background**

Roma are documented as living in Serbia from at least the 14th century. According to government estimates, their number is between 250,000 and 500,000. The majority of Roma suffer widespread and systematic discrimination in Serbia.

This report is based on research carried out by Amnesty International in Serbia between 2010 and 2011, including interviews with Roma affected by forced evictions in Belgrade; Serbian Roma and non-Roma non governmental organizations (NGOs) and individuals working to protect the rights of Roma; government and municipal officials; international NGOs and others.