

# AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

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## **Slovakia: Romani children denied equal education free from discrimination**

*"Children here are mentally retarded. There is a tendency to integrate Romani children in primary schools, but pupils with mental and social retardation stay the same. Children from a socially disadvantaged environment suffer from social and mental retardation."*

Head teacher of a special school where 95 per cent of the pupils are Roma

(Bratislava) Huge numbers of Romani children are still being placed disproportionately in special schools and classes for children with mental disabilities and learning difficulties, or segregated in Roma-only mainstream schools across the country, Amnesty International said today.

The organization's report, *Still separate, still unequal: Violations of the right to education for Romani children in Slovakia*, reveals that Romani children placed unnecessarily in special schools receive a reduced curriculum and have practically no possibilities of reintegrating into mainstream schools or advancing to secondary education.

The reports calls on the authorities of Slovakia to state loud and clear their determination to eradicate segregation in the education of Romani children and to take swift measures to reverse it.

"Regardless of their individual abilities, many Romani children receive a sub-standard education in segregated classes. The failure of the government to provide adequate education for all Romani children blights their future employment prospects, and adds to a cycle of marginalization and poverty for Roma people," said Nicola Duckworth, Europe and Central Asia Programme Director at Amnesty International.

Amnesty International is concerned that the way assessments are conducted and the criteria used to place a child in a special school or special remedial class within mainstream schools could amount to discrimination as they do not take into account effectively cultural and linguistic differences. Evaluations of the process revealed that up to 50 per cent of Romani children in special schools or classes had been placed there erroneously.

"A child living in a shack with no electricity or running water in the middle of nowhere will not know how to flush a toilet or use a bathroom. Such a child would not know how to hold a pencil or draw a picture or speak Slovak but this should not deprive them of their basic right to proper education," Nicola Duckworth said.

A further concern to Amnesty International is the widespread existence of Roma-only schools and classes. In some parts of eastern Slovakia, 100 per cent of schools are segregated. According to Slovak law, parents have the right to choose their child's school. This policy, taken at face value, appears neutral - but, in fact, contributes to segregation. Freedom of parental choice has reportedly resulted in increased withdrawal of non-Romani children from schools predominantly attended by Romani children. Parental choice, coupled with the lack of free transportation for Romani children to school has influenced segregation and radically reduced interaction between Roma and other children in Slovakia.

Although the government of Slovakia insists that segregation is not official government policy, so far it has failed to genuinely commit to stopping it. As a representative of the Slovak authorities told Amnesty International, it is easy to segregate but it is much more difficult to desegregate.

"Civil society has the expertise and the experience to contribute to solving the question of segregation and discrimination against Romani children. A meaningful improvement is possible only with the concerted pro-active engagement by the government of Slovakia and the authorities at all levels, working in conjunction with Romani communities and non-governmental organizations," Nicola Duckworth said.

Amnesty International welcomes the special measures that the government of Slovakia has introduced, such as preparatory classes, the employment of teaching assistants, financial incentives for mainstream schools to integrate Romani children, as well as some training for teachers working with Romani children. However, all these measures are not compulsory and in many cases they are not implemented at local level.

The right to education is linked to other important human rights, such as the right to adequate housing. Approximately one third of the Romani population in Slovakia live in settlements situated outside towns and villages, with limited or no water or electricity supplies, sanitation systems, paved roads or other basic infrastructure. The inadequate housing of Roma has a significant impact on the ability of Romani children to exercise their right to education. Katarina Krušénová from the Roma settlement near Letanovce in Eastern Slovakia told Amnesty International delegates: "We have one candle and we want the children to study at home, but it is over very quickly...".

"The Roma have the same aspirations as the majority population in Slovakia. The government must assume responsibility and promote, protect and fulfil the right to education of Romani children. It must also make the Roma segregated and impoverished settlements a thing of the past." Nicola Duckworth said.

"It is very important that the European Union, of which Slovakia is a member, supports the government in all genuine efforts to address the systematic violation of the right to education of Romani children. The European Union can do so by providing necessary financial and technical assistance, by monitoring how it is used, and crucially by ensuring the participation of the Roma community in all stages of taking and implementing policies and programmes affecting their lives."

## Background

Amnesty International's report *Still separate, still unequal: Violations of the right to education for Romani children in Slovakia*, is one of several by the organization examining the discrimination faced by the Romani communities in different European countries.

The report is based on research conducted during missions to Slovakia in 2006 and 2007. Amnesty International delegates visited Romani communities throughout the country, from Bratislava to Kosice. Amnesty International interviewed members of the Romani communities, government and education officials and professionals and civil society groups. Some of the people featured in the report did not want to appear with their real names because they feared implications in their everyday lives. The report focuses on the life and education conditions in settlements in eastern Slovakia as they are the most representative of the problems addressed.

The data in the report come from official government statistics, and research conducted by international and local organizations and institutions.

**See:** *Still separate, still unequal: Violations of the right to education for Romani children in Slovakia*, AI Index: EUR 72/001/2007 <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engneur720012007>  
*Slovakia: Roma and the right to education, Factsheet*, AI Index: EUR 72/005/2007  
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engneur720052007>  
*Europe: Discrimination against Roma*, AI Index: EUR 01/012/2007  
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engneur010122007>  
*False starts: The exclusion of Romani children from primary education in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia and Slovenia*, AI Index: EUR 05/002/2006 <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engneur050022006>

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