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OSCE Human Dimensions Implementation Meeting (HDIM)

STATEMENT ON ROMA RIGHTS IN GREECE

11 October 2006

What is the position of the Greek government, the Council of Europe and the OSCE on the very serious negative developments in Greece concerning Roma rights described in the following texts?

On 1 September 2006, PACE MP Boris Cilevics tabled the following question on Greece's Roma: <http://assembly.coe.int/Main.asp?link=/Documents/WorkingDocs/Doc06/EDOC11014.htm>

“One year ago, replying to my questions, the Committee of Ministers reassured the Assembly that Greek authorities were working on finding a permanent solution to the housing problems of the Roma in Patras. They also stated that the information on how Greece complied with its obligations under Article 16 of the European Social Charter was to be evaluated by the European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR). The Assembly was informed that, on the basis of the result of that evaluation, the Committee of Ministers was to decide on the follow-up.

However, in July 2006 the ECSR concluded that the situation in Greece has not been brought into conformity with Article 16 as there is still a shortage of adequate housing for Roma, who still do not have sufficient legal protection. Citing the Commissioner for Human Rights March 2006 follow up report on Greece, as well as Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM) and Amnesty International reports, the ECSR mentioned that Roma continue to be evicted from settlements without being offered alternative housing.

Recently, GHM information provided to competent UN and Council of Europe agencies and international NGOs indicates that relocation plans for Patras Roma failed because of strong local community reactions. Instead, between 27 July and 25 August 2006, the Municipality of Patras demolished the homes of Roma families in the Makrigianni district who were absent for seasonal work, served the remaining families with notices of emergency police measures of eviction, and without waiting for their confirmation by a prosecutor proceeded to forced evictions. Furthermore, in June 2006, all Roma families of the Riganokampos district were referred to a criminal trial for illegal squatting on state land, while in August 2006 they were told to leave. All that despite the protocols of eviction for both Roma communities had been overturned as abusive in October 2005 by magistrates. In June 2006, the Chief Appeals Prosecutor of Patras announced an obviously intimidating criminal investigation of the magistrates who issued these rulings and of GHM who offered legal support to the Roma. GHM also provided information on several evictions elsewhere in Greece and quoted official Hellenic Police statistics indicating that its officers were involved in 60 eviction procedures in 2005 and in another 121 in 2004.

Mr Cilevics,

To ask the Committee of Ministers,

What urgent action does the Committee of Ministers intend to take on Greece's continuing non-compliance with Article 16, the widespread evictions which violate fundamental human rights and the mounting antigypsyism accompanying these evictions?

What mechanisms of effective supervision of the implementation by states of Social Charter rulings does the Committee of Ministers intend to introduce?"

On 26 September 2006, the **Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe Thomas Hammarberg**, visited the Roma settlements in **Patras**. On 28 September 2006 he issued the following statement to the media in Greece about the disrespectful manipulation of his visit by the Greek authorities:

"The Patras municipality has published a press release on my visit to the Roma settlements on Tuesday. This official text was incorrect on several points and a correction is unfortunately necessary.

First, statements are put in my mouth which I never made. This is most unusual and unacceptable and a sign of disrespect for an international official.

Second, the release gives the impression that I criticized an NGO, Greek Helsinki Monitor. This is untrue. On the contrary, I explained that I wanted to listen to all sides - the Roma, the NGOs, the neighbours and the authorities. I regret this attempt to use my credibility against an NGO.

Third, the release gives a wrong impression of the purpose of my visit. I did not come to pass a judgement for or against the authorities and I did certainly not congratulate them. I came in an honest attempt to learn and understand. I was therefore negatively surprised that some of my interviews with the Roma themselves were disturbed by municipality officials or neighbours.

In due time I will discuss my conclusions on the Roma issue with the appropriate authorities."

On 29 September, in an interview to "**Flash 96**" Athens radio station he also said:

"It is outrageous that a local authority puts statements in the mouth of an international official without informing him and of course all these statements were untrue. This has never happened to me in the past and I can say that I am surprised. I seriously consider reporting this incident to the Council of Europe. If our work is undermined with such statements, there follows confusion in the public opinion about what we are doing. This seriously complicates our work and I have to react but I must first discuss this with the Greek government, on how to deal with the situation. I would like to forget this incident but it is necessary to clarify that something like that cannot happen again. It is a sign of disrespect to an important representative of the Council of Europe."