



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement in Celebration of 2012 International Roma Day

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
April 19, 2012

I would like to send my best wishes to Roma everywhere, adding my voice to those of Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the many U.S. Ambassadors in Europe and other U.S. government officials who recently commemorated International Roma Day on April 8 this year.

International Roma Day was declared in 1990, during the Fourth World Romani Congress, to honor its first gathering in 1971. More than two decades later, and despite gains made in building greater awareness of Romani culture, the conditions facing Roma across Europe should be unacceptable in democracies.

As Secretary Clinton said on April 8, International Roma Day is intended “to celebrate the history, impact and culture of Romani people. From music and art to science and literature, Romani people have contributed in ways large and small to the fabric of countless societies. But too often and in too many places, they are forced to live on the margins. They are segregated, beaten and discriminated against.”

Reports by numerous international organizations document the alarming levels of deprivation, discrimination and marginalization faced by Roma in virtually every country where they reside in significant numbers. Roma access to housing, employment, health care and education are the lowest of any ethnic group in Europe, while infant mortality and early death statistics for Europe’s approximately 12 million Roma citizens are among the highest. In too many states, including ones with strong human rights records in other areas, the rights of Roma are frequently violated.

In an April 5 statement, ODIHR Director Lenarcic drew attention to the “dire living conditions and lack of registered legal place of residence endured by many Roma,” noting that forced evictions of Roma in a number of OSCE participating states have been carried out without sufficient notice or provision of adequate alternative housing. Meanwhile, anti-Roma rhetoric and violence are also on the rise.

The OSCE’s High Commissioner for National Minorities, in addressing these worrisome phenomena late last year, called on “political leaders, and police and judicial authorities across the OSCE to take resolute, consistent and urgent action against violence and the dangerous ‘mainstreaming of intolerance in the political and public sphere.’” In testimony before the U.S. Helsinki Commission in February, ODIHR’s Senior Advisor for Roma and Sinti Issues and the Director of the European Roma Rights Centre spoke powerfully about the growing sense of vulnerability among Europe’s Roma populations in the face of these trends.

As Secretary Clinton noted recently, “helping to promote and protect the inalienable rights of Roma everywhere...is a stated foreign policy priority of the Obama Administration.” Among other ongoing efforts to further this aim, the United States is providing financial support for ODIHR’s multi-country project to promote Roma integration in the Balkans and the U.S. will join the Decade of Roma Inclusion, a collaboration of governments, international organizations and civil society, as an official observer this summer. We are encouraged by the European Union’s adoption last year of an EU framework for national Roma strategies. The framework has enormous potential to improve the social and economic integration of Roma, but progress will depend, first and foremost, on the efforts of governments; through our embassies we will continue to seek ways to support those efforts. Finally, we urge our fellow participating States to draw on the valuable expertise and resources of the OSCE, and in particular, the Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues, as you pursue the urgent task of promoting Roma rights.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.