

7 April 2011

Original: ENGLISH



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on International Roma Day

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires, a. i. Carol Fuller
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
April 7, 2011

Tomorrow, April the 8th, the world will mark International Roma Day. Since 1990, this day has been set aside as an opportunity to celebrate Romani culture and raise awareness of the issues facing the largest single ethnic minority on the European continent – the Romani people. Today there are an estimated fifteen million Roma worldwide, with approximately ten to twelve million Roma in Europe and an estimated one million in the United States. As U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said last year, "Protecting and promoting the human rights of Roma everywhere has long been a personal commitment for me, and under the Obama Administration, it is a priority of the United States."

In addition to the 2003 OSCE Action Plan on Improving the Situation for Roma and Sinti, OSCE efforts to protect and promote the human rights of Romani people have taken the form of two Ministerial Decisions in the last three years, decisions dealing particularly with education. As a corollary to those, the United States wants to use the occasion of International Roma Day to urge participating States to teach our children about the history of the Roma, and especially about the Roma Holocaust – or the porajmos, meaning, "the devouring" in the Romani language - in which hundreds of thousands, indeed by some estimates as many as 1.5 million Roma died as a result of systematic extermination based on their ethnicity.

Although some countries are beginning to acknowledge and commemorate Romani experiences during the Holocaust, there is, in some participating States, a simultaneous resurgence of portrayals of Romani people as genetically inferior. This confirms the crucial need for continued education about the porajmos. In this respect, we welcome the planned unveiling of a memorial in Berlin for Sinti and Roma victims of genocide and look forward to hearing about the progress and scheduling of that important event.

This year, we also wish to mark the occasion of International Roma Day by calling upon public officials – of all ranks - from village elders to city council members and from mayors to presidents, to use care when speaking about Roma issues. This past year, we have seen examples of public officials using language—for perceived political advantage--to inflame the passions of those already predisposed to hate. Words matter, and the language of public officials influences public perceptions of minorities. We, therefore, urge leaders to speak out against others who pander to ignorance and prejudice when speaking about relations between Roma and non-Roma in Europe. We thank the OSCE Contact Point on Roma and Sinti Issues and the High Commissioner on National Minorities for the important work they do in this regard.

I am also pleased today to report on a number of important initiatives supported by the U.S. government to promote and protect the human rights of Roma and Sinti people, in cooperation with several participating States. Over the past year, the U. S. government has provided \$750,000 in assistance to bring legal services and public legal education to Romani communities in Bulgaria, Macedonia, Romania, and Serbia, and to train Romani civic leaders and NGOs to engage effectively in local, national, and regional advocacy. Under two new initiatives being launched this month, we will provide an additional \$1 million for programs that focus on youth civic education and engagement, and provide opportunities for interethnic collaboration between Romani and majority community youths in Hungary, Romania, Slovakia, and Moldova.

Just last month, First Lady Michelle Obama and Secretary Clinton presented the International Women of Courage Awards in Washington, D.C. Included in the distinguished group of recipients was Hungarian Parliamentarian Agnes Osztolykan. As the only Roma woman in Hungary's parliament and a tireless advocate for the rights of Roma and members of other minority communities in her country, Ms. Osztolykan is a fitting example to recall on International Roma Day. As Mrs. Obama said to the award recipients that day, "People everywhere who care about freedom and justice and equality will walk with you." This is the message we also celebrate today as we move forward toward a world where freedom, justice, and equality for Roma people everywhere are firmly established.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.