



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on the Trends of Anti-Roma Violence and Responsibilities of Leaders in the OSCE

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
July 26, 2012

I take the floor today to discuss my government's growing concern over discrimination and violence against Romani persons in the OSCE region. Regrettably, in several cases, government leaders and public officials have failed to speak out against violence or other human rights violations, such as evictions without due process, or to take swift, effective action in response to such acts. In some cases, public officials have exacerbated the problem by using anti-Roma rhetoric or perpetuating anti-Roma stereotypes, including in the context of electoral campaigns. The OSCE High Commissioner for National Minorities has highlighted the growing risks of intolerance toward Roma and called on officials to "show leadership and confront such messages. They should denounce hatred and marginalization and ensure the basic security and full respect for the rights of all their residents, particularly those from minority backgrounds."

The 2011 U.S. Human Rights Report details worrisome trends with respect to the treatment of Roma across the continent; unfortunately, the trend does not appear to be slowing this year. I would like briefly to mention several disparate incidents -- ranging from fatal shootings to denial of adequate housing to troubling speech -- that have taken place in the last few months and illustrate the broad scope of the problem. Unfortunately, this list is by no means exhaustive.

Over the last six months in Macedonia, Roma report being denied the right to leave their country by Macedonian authorities for fear they will seek asylum in neighboring EU countries and potentially jeopardize Macedonia's accession talks with the EU.

According to a report by the European Roma Rights Centre, in March in Lyon, France, more than a hundred Roma, including 35 children, who sought shelter in a factory following an eviction were the targets of verbal threats and physical attacks, including a Molotov cocktail that was thrown at the car belonging to one of the Roma. Notwithstanding steps the French government is taking to address some of the legal obstacles faced by Roma in France, observers there continue to highlight the difficult living conditions that Roma face in several of the country's major cities, along with a general climate of intolerance and prejudice.

In Belgrade this April, Romani families were forced out of homes they had lived in for years and made to live in metal containers without compensation for their loss. Some families were placed in an abandoned warehouse without access to electricity or potable water.

In May this year, after a Roma man was accused of murdering an Italian man in the city of Pescara, a large group gathered for an anti-Roma demonstration, some carrying banners that read "Hunt Roma for 5 days." Local Romani residents were afraid to leave their homes or

visit local shops, and some Romani families kept their children home from school. Police reportedly informally warned Roma not to leave their homes for fear of violence. In a visit to Italy earlier this month, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights welcomed the recent adoption of a national strategy for Roma integration, but stressed the need for consistent implementation, noting that actions such as the attempt to overturn the Council of State ruling declaring the Nomad Emergency unlawful or the continuing construction of a segregated camp near Rome “appear to contradict the spirit of the strategy.”

Also in May, it was revealed that Romani job applicants at a employment center in Glasgow, Scotland, were regularly referred to as “gypos, scum, beggars, and thieves” by the staff, to the point that many applicants give up hope of attaining the dignity that comes from gainful employment. According to one whistle-blower at the center, Roma are regularly threatened and abused; people have had benefits stopped unjustly; staff deliberately fails to organize language assistance, and there is open hostility demonstrated towards organizations that advocate for Roma.

In May in Bucharest, Romania, while pursuing two people suspected of stealing from a construction site, police reportedly chased one Romani man into a lake and shot and killed him when he did not stop.

Last month, in Sandanski, Bulgaria, a bomb was set off in front of the headquarters of the Roma political party Euroma. Malin Iliev, one of the party’s candidates in a local election, was holding the package when it exploded, blowing his arm off.

Also in June, an off-duty police officer in Hurbanovo, Slovakia, shot and killed three Romani people and injured two other members of the same family. Widespread public reaction following the shooting blamed the Romani victims and called for repeat attacks against Roma. The government failed to condemn these mass expressions of hatred towards the Romani community. In the run-up to elections earlier this year, such sentiments were exploited by the Slovak National Party (which did not make it into Parliament) which produced billboards with slogans such as “How much longer are we going to pay for Gypsies?”

That same month in Ukraine, just before the European Football Championship began, the Romani camp in the Kyiv suburb of Berezniaky was burned down. Some Roma believe it was because they had built their homes near the railway tracks, which would be bringing thousands of fans to the football championships. To date, police have not launched an investigation into this arson attack.

Earlier this month, a Czech Senator was sued for defamatory remarks after publicly claiming the Romani population was characterized by “loitering, a parasitic way of life that abuses welfare, rent defaulting, an inability to keep a job, criminality, promiscuity, incestual sexual practices in their community and a failure to uphold any basic norms or rules of civic life and coexistence.”

These examples differ widely, but all serve to highlight the need for participating States to redouble efforts to combat growing anti-Roma sentiment and actions on the European continent. We are pleased that the European Union held a symposium on Roma issues within the OSCE space on June 22nd in the Hofburg. It was a frank and at times difficult discussion about the stark state of affairs. But more needs to be done.

Mr. Chairman, we understand fully that it is beyond the power of any state to prevent all forms of violence, discrimination or hatred. But it is the responsibility of officials to act decisively to counter such acts and to ensure that their actions and public statements

encourage tolerance and understanding, not contribute to discrimination or give comfort to those who seek to portray Europe's Roma citizens as somehow less deserving of the fundamental rights and freedoms that all OSCE participating States have committed to protect.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.