



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement on Commemoration of Roma Genocide

As delivered by Ambassador Ian Kelly
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
July 28, 2011

On August 2, the United States will join others in remembering the night of August 2-3, 1944, when the “Zigeunerlager” at Auschwitz was liquidated, and nearly three thousand Romani men, women, and children were sent to the gas chambers.

During World War II, Romani people were targeted for extermination by the Nazis on the basis of their ethnicity and, according to conservative estimates, at least half a million Romani people perished as a result of their systematic extermination at concentration and death camps, forced labor, medical experiments, and other forms of persecution.

Suffering of this magnitude should be acknowledged and remembered. Unfortunately, Roma are, as the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum describes them, “understudied” victims of the Nazi regime. Indeed, much important research regarding the fate of Roma during the Second World War still needs to be done. We commend Father Patrick Desbois for his ongoing efforts to document the location of mass graves sites in Ukraine and other eastern European areas occupied during the war. His work has identified 48 mass graves of Roma.

Mister Chairman, as Thomas Hammarberg, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, said, “Even after the [...] Nazi killing of at least half a million Roma, probably 700,000 or more, there was no genuine change of attitude among the majority population towards the Roma.”

We call on authorities in all participating States to increase public awareness of the genocide of Roma – not only as an exercise in history, but to combat the pernicious ideology of racial hierarchy that the Nazis used to justify genocide seven decades ago and that continues to foster hatred and hate crimes against Roma today. We need to fulfill our OSCE commitments, as outlined in the Action Plan on Improving the Situation of Roma and Sinti within the OSCE Area, to “include Roma history and culture in educational texts, with particular consideration given to the experience of Roma and Sinti people during the Holocaust.” We must learn about the genocide of Roma so that, as Nobel Laureate Desmond Tutu said of all genocides, “we might be filled with revulsion at what took place and thus be inspired, indeed galvanized, to commit ourselves to ensure that such atrocities should never happen again.”

The genocide of Roma and Sinti followed centuries of societal prejudices and systematic repression of these ethnic groups. Unfortunately, prejudices against the Roma did not end after the war. Even today, we note the presence in some political discourse of terms like

“Gypsy crime” and “Gypsy-opolis,” which are reminiscent of the Nazi-era. Governments and political leaders have a responsibility to counter negative portrayals of Roma and Sinti, to combat discrimination, and to foster a greater understanding of Romani culture and history, including the genocide.

As we remember the terrible losses of the night of August 2-3, we have the opportunity to protect the Romani minority, along with other vulnerable groups, against further acts of violence and xenophobia.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.