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CENTRE ON  
HOUSING RIGHTS  
AND EVICTIONS



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14 August 2007

To: Mr Romano Prodi, President of the Council of Ministers

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Honourable Prime Ministers Prodi and Tariceanu,

The organizations named above are writing today to express extreme concern at evidently race-based forced evictions of Roma in a number of localities in Italy, as well as the organized expulsion of Romanian Roma from Italy, apparently as part of coordinated action by Italian and Romanian authorities.

On 19 July 2007, Italian police and other officials, working in active cooperation with Romanian police, who were present at the site, forcibly evicted from their housing, destroying their belongings and leaving them without shelter, circa 1000 Roma, mainly from Romania, from a settlement in Via dell'Imbarco, Magliana area of Rome. Following the eviction, the local police trade unions [OSPOL] issued a critical statement against the participation of Romanian policemen in the operation as, according to the statement, this contravenes Italian criminal law.

Earlier in July 2007, Italian police and other officials forcibly evicted approximately 100 Romanian Roma from a settlement in Bagno di Tivoli, near Rome. In the operation, residents' personal properties and dwellings were destroyed.

These actions are evidently part of new agreements between Romanian officials and authorities in Western Europe to cooperate on racially discriminatory expulsions of persons targeting Roma specifically. On 25 June 2007, Mr. Walter Veltroni, mayor of Rome, travelled to Romania for an official visit to discuss with the mayors of Craiova, Calarasi and Turnu Severin, the Prime Minister of Romania Mr. Calin Popescu Tariceanu, and the secretary of the Social Democratic Party, Mr. Mircea Geoana, the possibility of "setting up an exportable model for other towns too, Italian and European, capable of sustaining local development, to reduce the number of immigrants in Rome and, mainly create favourable conditions for returning to their country". Despite the declaration that this will be a plan for "voluntary return", the intention is clearly to repatriate Roma forcibly. During Mayor Veltroni's visit to Romania an agreement was signed to collaborate with Romanian police concerning the eviction, identification and repatriation of Romanian Roma living in settlements in Rome.

Vice-President of the European Commission Franco Frattini recently stated, referring to Roma, that: "it is not true that European citizens cannot be repatriated ... There is a very clear directive, valid for all citizens of the European Union that provides for the expulsion for all those who cannot prove to have adequate means of subsistence to live in a dignified way". This statement has been used in several declarations of politicians and members of the institutions in anti-Roma speeches. The mayor of Verona, Mr. Flavio Tosi, who had previously been sentenced to two months jail for racist propaganda against the Sinti, used this input to state that many of the Romanian Roma living in a "nomads' camp" can be expatriated. These statements are particularly significant in light of the fact that, since Romania joined the European Union on 1 January 2007, Romanian citizens have enjoyed freedom of movement in the Union, and the Italian government has not imposed any restrictions on Romanian citizens concerning establishment in Italy. Apparently the price of this general openness is emerging as race-specific exclusion of some particular Romanians.

Indeed, the large evictions of the past month in Rome appear to be a part of a wider cycle of anti-Romani hysteria in Italy – hysteria directed against Romanian Roma in particular -- leading directly to human rights abuse. On 11 August 2007, four Romanian Romani children (Lenuca, Danchiu, Dengi and Eva) aged between 4 and 10 died in a fire that burned down for reason as yet unknown the hut where they were temporarily living with their parents in Livorno, following their forced eviction from Pisa in May 2007. The parents are currently in detention charged with abandonment of minor and parental negligence. In the wake of these events, the Italian media has been full of calls for authorities to "do something" about the "problem" of Roma from Romania.

Honourable Prime Ministers,

Italy as well as Romania have been repeatedly urged to cease race-based targeting of Roma, and to end patterns and practices of human rights abuse of Roma. During the past decade, the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination has on a number of occasions expressed concern at Italy's and Romania's treatment of Roma. In addition, in recent years, the Italian government has been forced to pursue friendly settlement at the European Court of Human Rights as a result of patently illegal collective expulsions of Roma from Italy. Romania has been repeatedly found in contravention of the European Convention on Human Rights for its treatment of Roma, most recently two weeks ago. In 2005, the European Committee of Social Rights found Italy in violation of 3 distinct aspects of the Revised European Social Charter, as a result of the systemic frustration of the right to housing where Roma are concerned. Current developments in Italy indicate that the Italian government intends flagrantly to disregard that decision.

The signatory associations are also deeply worried about official reactions by Romanian authorities to the crisis in Italy and, several weeks previously, Ireland, as well as about some of the declarations of leading Romanian politicians. Just in the last months Mr. Traian Basescu, the President of Romania, spoke about a (non-Romani) journalist in sexist and racist terms, including calling her a "stinking Gypsy woman". He was sanctioned for discrimination on ethnic grounds, but not for discrimination in terms of gender. Mr. Vasile Dancu, Vice-President of Social Democrat Party and a deputy in the Democrat Party made publicly a distinction between "Gypsyism" and anything else that is positive. On 23 July 2007, the Romanian Ambassador to Ireland, Mrs. Davidoiu, issued a press release regarding the situation of a Romanian Roma group in Ireland. The press release, an official declaration of the Romanian Government, signed by the highest-level diplomat of the country in Ireland, suggested that Roma (nowhere in the press release their Romanian citizenship is mentioned) are criminals and liars, although the investigation of law enforcement officials in Bucharest as result of these Roma being deported showed that none of them left Romania illegally nor committed any crime. Moreover, her Excellency continues, the Roma's purpose in Ireland is to accuse the Romanian Government of discrimination. The statement suggests that Roma are the enemies of Romania more than citizens of the state, a strategy that perpetuates and legitimates the anti-Gypsyism already generally evident in Romania.

These statements emphasise the perception that Roma are different from non-Roma, thus justifying institutional discrimination against them. They also degrade the commonweal in an atmosphere of intense anti-Romani sentiment. Anti-Gypsyism in Italy and Romania is extremely high. For example, the Romanian Government's (Interethnic Relations Department) poll of May 2007 indicated that 98% of the questioned people would not accept Roma as members of their family.

Most worryingly however, these statements appear to be a part of serial actions -- undertaken by a number of Western European countries with the active support and encouragement of the Romanian government -- of which Italy is now the latest, to collectively expel Romanian Roma from those countries.

Honourable Prime Ministers,

Race-based, collective expulsion of persons have no place in Europe as a mode of addressing extreme social exclusion. We urge you to undertake any and all measures available to your offices to intervene to cease and reverse these actions. We would greatly appreciate being informed of all measures undertaken in this regard.

Sincerely,



Piero Colacicchi  
President  
OsservAzione



Claude Cahn  
Head of Advocacy Unit  
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