

Italian cities to clear gypsy sites

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By Guy Dinmore in Rome

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Several city authorities across Italy are clearing out gypsy settlements, blaming rising crime on a mass influx of migrants caused by European Union enlargement.

Local activists have denounced what they see as an undeclared but co-ordinated campaign against the Roma and Sinti communities driven by national election politics and the media.

Uprooted families, some attacked by rightwing vigilantes, are leaving Italy. Some groups are returning to Romania; others are being drawn to the UK and Germany by accounts of better treatment.

In the mud left by torrential rain, gypsy families in a camp in the suburb of Tor Di Quinto in northern Rome keep warm by burning the remnants of shacks destroyed by municipal police in a raid last week.

Camp 26 was a patch of land with rudimentary facilities provided by the city in the 1990s to take in gypsy families fleeing Yugoslavia's violent collapse. But over the years, Camp 26 kept growing. Many of its 80 or so children were born there and attend local schools.

Police appear to have targeted newer arrivals. Those remaining are fearful and not keen to talk openly.

"Many people have gone. I don't know where they went. I see some sleep on the cycle path, on the ground," said one gypsy man who would not give his name. "We want prefabricated housing, money for our kids like we hear Roma get in other countries. We are now thinking we might move to Germany," he said.

They complain bitterly about the government's hasty response to the grisly murder near there of a senior navy officer's wife, allegedly by a Romanian gypsy, late last month. With right-wing politicians and the media stirring up the frenzy, the centre-left government issued a decree authorising local officials to expel EU citizens from Italy on grounds of public security.

As of Tuesday, the interior ministry said 283 people had been expelled, 264 for public-security reasons and 19 for lacking right of residence. Most were Romanian gypsies, a senior police source said. Activists estimate that municipal police have destroyed illegal settlements of several thousand gypsies in Rome, Bologna, Pisa, Pavia and other towns.

Rome has the largest number of gypsies and its mayor, Walter Veltroni, has ambitions to lead the next centre-left government.

Crime and security top voters' concerns, and Mr Veltroni wants to show that the right does not have a monopoly on being tough. He openly blames Rome's rising crime on the "massive influx" of immigrants who arrived after Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU on January 1.

"Rome had been a very secure city until last December. Security was not a problem at all, the [crime] data were good, with the average much below other Italian cities," he told the Financial Times. "But the inflow in recent months has reached massive proportions that we cannot sustain in any way."

Mr Veltroni said "integration and security" underline his policy towards gypsy communities. He has also been to Romania to help improve conditions that might induce gypsies to stay at home. Over five years he has moved 15,000 people from camps in Rome into decent shelter.

A solution to the immigration crisis had to be found at the level of the EU, he said, echoing a position backed by the Italian and Romanian governments.

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