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RACIAL DISCRIMINATION AND VIOLENCE AGAINST ROMA IN GREECE

Statement made before the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination at its 57th Session (Thematic Discussion on Roma, August 15, 2000)

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When the government of Prime Minister Costas Simitis came to power, in January 1996, many hopes were raised that Greece will finally engage in a modernist course that will include full respect of human and minority rights. Mr. Simitis was in fact given an opportunity right away, in February 1996, to justify such expectations. A televised live police raid of a destitute Roma settlement in Aspropyrgos, near Athens, with police using excessive violence, made him order heavy sanctions against the instigators and damages to be paid to the victims. In his speech inaugurating the EU's campaign against racism a year later, in February 1997, he mentioned that police action as an example of racism in Greece. In the meantime, upon his instructions, three ministers launched in July 1996 an ambitious "Framework Program" of 3 billion drs. through the end of 1997. It included, inter alia, the "immediate, within 1996" setting up of five temporary but adequately equipped settlements (in Menemeni, Messini, Thebes, Karditsa, Rhodes) and the resettlement of two other communities in Antirrio and Serres.

Regrettably, the implementation of that policy to fight institutionalized racism and provide decent living conditions to the Roma failed dismally. The government's own "**Implementation Review for 1996-2000**" mentions that the aforementioned (re)settlements are still in the implementation phase. Moreover, not only no Aspropyrgos Romani family received any funds for the 1996 damages, but the government's "Review" does not even mention any plans to provide that community with decent living conditions. So, the local authorities have interpreted that silence as a go ahead for its "divide and cleanse plan" it has been implementing since 1997. The few Roma living in the Aspropyrgos-Ano Liosia settlements who are registered in these municipalities have been offered money or supposed better conditions to move away, while the vast majority of the other Roma, who had migrated from the rest of the country, have been summarily, brutally and illegally evicted. Four such evictions have occurred since 1997. The most recent is going on this summer. All efforts to prevent these evictions –as well as similar ones in Greater Athens- or find alternative sites to house these Roma have failed as local authorities claim they want the land on which Roma are or can be settled to build sports facilities for the 2004 Athens Olympic Games. **Will the international community, including the International Olympic Committee, tolerate a cleansed, Roma-free, Greater Athens as the host of these Games?**

The **Executive Director of the European Roma Rights Center, Dimitrina Petrova**, after her field mission in Greece, stated to the **French News Agency** (12 May 1998) that:

«Roma are not treated and do not live like humans, they exist outside society, their situation is totally unacceptable.» Education for Greek [Roma], of whom 80 percent are illiterate according to local NGOs, is at the root of many of their problems, Petrova noted. "In this field, Greece is the worst country in East and Central Europe," she said. Petrova described as "stupefying" the poverty in which many [Roma] exist and the level of police violence to which they are subjected. "In many regions, it seems routine to badly treat and subject arrested [Roma] to brutality," Petrova said, adding that these incidents were never taken up by the authorities.»

The **Vice-President of “Doctors of the World - Greece” Yannis Boukovinas** said (to state television station **ET-3** on 24 October 1998) about the largest Roma settlement near Salonica, near the Gallikos river: *“It is worse than the refugee camps I have visited with our organization in occupied Palestine or war-torn Irak .”*

The government’s “Review” does mention that Gallikos Romani community. It claimed (when submitted to Parliament, in response to a question by MP Maria Damanaki, in February 2000) that its relocation to a fully-equipped settlement, in Gonou, was being completed. But, in September 1998, answering another parliamentary question by MP Stella Alfieri, the government had already promised that the mine-sweeping of the former barracks of Gonou would have been finished by November 1998, which meant that the infrastructure would have been ready by February 1999. While, when probed by the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities (HCNM), in May 1999, the government had promised that the resettlement would be completed by September 1999 (OSCE HCNM **“Report on the Situation of Roma and Sinti in the OSCE Area,”** April 2000, p. 115). Before the April 2000 elections, work was temporarily speeded up for the local politicians –like Minister of Defense Akis Tsohatzopoulos- to be able to boast in front of television cameras that completion was imminent, so as to be able to gather votes. Today, in mid-August 2000, work is still in progress: the government had in the meantime announced a 30 July 2000 deadline (**Macedonian Press Agency**, 19/7/2000), not honored either. Had it not been for the continuous pressure by the local DROM and other national NGOs (which had even brought charges against the state for negligence in 1997), the Gonou project (not included in the original 1996 Framework Program) would not have existed or would have been abandoned, as implicitly acknowledged even by the OSCE HCNM (*ibid*, p. 115).

The Greek government proved beyond any doubt that it lacked the political will to house Europe’s most destitute Roma when it mobilized the administration in September 1999 for the victims of the Athens earthquake. Free space was found instantaneously to locate temporary housing for an earthquake-stricken population larger than the total number of destitute Roma in Greece. Infrastructure works were completed almost overnight and pre-fabricated houses were allocated to all homeless victims. Ironically, there was an abundance of land for earthquake victims in municipalities near Athens, like Ano Liosia and Aspropyrgos, where its scarcity had been the primary excuse for the inability to relocate the Roma living there.

Greece’s disheartening reality was aptly described by the OSCE HCNM:

“The experience of Roma settlements in Greece highlights a problem that has salience in many countries. The effectiveness of any policy vis-à-vis Roma can turn upon the cooperation of multiple layers of government. But responsibility for inadequate policy implementation cannot be laid solely at the doorstep of local authorities. In some countries that have undertaken initiatives to develop comprehensive Roma policies, national officials appointed to implement those policies operate without adequate support at the most senior levels of government. In order to be effective, public servants require the support of national leaders and local officials” (*ibid*, p. 116-117).

And not only of them, it could be added. Even the **Rector of the University of Patras, Professor S. Alahiotis**, (in a meeting with GHM, MRG-G and the Prime Minister’s Office for Quality of Life, on 1 December 1999, to discuss ways to help Roma squatting on or near university property) states, without offering even a shred of evidence when probed, that:

“Gypsies know that they are entitled to certain rights and they play the fool... They constantly rob, there have been people arrested. (...) The University is an international forum. What kind of sensitivity can there exist towards people who are trespassing private property, embarrassing the institution internationally when their goats show up in the amphitheaters? (...) We want to protect the reputation of the University, it is an interna-

tional forum, a showcase. We cannot tolerate that someone drives by it and a Gypsy throws stones..."

When, after a sustained NGO and –unprecedented for Greece- local media campaign, the mayor of Patras finally acknowledged in July 2000 his responsibility for the welfare of the Romani community of Riganokampos (university property but far away from its campus), and decided to provide it with running water as a first step, the Rector opposed the measure. He argued it may lead to semi-legalizing the Roma's presence in the area. So the water tabs were put instead alongside the adjacent road... The government's "Review" has no provision for this settlement.

The Greek government has recently been seen to encourage explicit municipal decisions branding all Roma criminals and asking for their eviction, even banning –in one case- their presence within town limits. Such unanimous decisions were taken in May and July 2000 by the municipal councils of Nea Kios, Nea Tyrintha and Midea (all in Argolida): in Nea Tyrintha, in fact, the eviction had been requested also by the Ministry of Justice... They helped create an explosive climate in the area that led, in June 2000, inter alia, to the burning of one Romani hut, the shooting of a Romani youth, the harassment of one journalist, and the ban of an anti-racist group from entering Nea Kios. When asked to condemn these openly racist and cleansing actions, the **Government Spokesman Minister Dimitris Reppas** rejected such suggestions and described these actions as "personal disputes, instances of "vendetta" that often break out in certain areas" (**Press Briefing**, 28 June 2000).

The **Greek Ombudsman's Office** has repeatedly warned of the illegal and sometimes racist character of eviction decisions or actions, and "blanket" police raids of Romani settlements in search of possible crime suspects, usually without the presence of a Public Prosecutor. In its 1 June 2000 letter to the Nea Kios Mayor and Municipal Council, it called parts of the text of the eviction decision as "*characteristic manifestations of hate speech and –especially- incitation of others –and specifically your citizens- to racial discrimination and actions of racial hatred.*" It also reminded these authorities that their decision, including the creation of citizens' guards, were leading to actions punishable by articles 1, 2 and 3 of the anti-racist law of 927/1979 on incitation to racial discrimination and hatred; on forming groups and organizing propaganda or activities aiming at racial discrimination; and on refusal to serve people on racial criteria.

Moreover, in a letter to the Salonica Police (11 August 2000), it pointed out that Romani huts are covered as homes by article 9 of the constitution; "*contrary opinion would discriminate in an unequivocally racist –and hence unconstitutional- way the dwellings of these groups of Greece's population on the basis of their nomadic way of life*". It has also urged them to "*avoid the creation of the stereotype of 'usual suspects' at the expense of racial minorities like the Roma*" and called a blanket police raid of the Gallikos Romani community, on 6 July 2000, a possible "*indication of the stereotypical view that links Roma with serious criminal offenses.*" While, in a 25 July 2000 "extremely urgent" letter to the Aspropyrgos Mayor and City Council, it reminded them that evictions from municipal property required "protocols of administrative eviction" issued by municipal authorities after a decision of the city council, which are to be served to the squatters first. It asked for prompt information on whether the late July 2000 police "cleaning" of the Romani settlements –in reality "cleansing" them including the leveling of Romani huts- was covered by such documents. If not, the police and municipal operation was in breach of article 241 (violation of the security of the home) and 331 (self-adjudication) of the Greek Penal Code.

The Ombudsman will probably be once again ignored. No Public Prosecutor will seriously investigate these cases, even when charges are pressed, if we judge by recent practice. Nor will there be an internal investigation. As the Ombudsman wrote in its "**Annual Report 1999:**"

"Human rights violations by the administration (...) can be codified with the words arbitrariness-indifference-bias-impunity; they take their most acute form when applied on

vulnerable social groups (p. 18). Often the administration arbitrarily uses public interest as an excuse to restrict individual rights or shows illegal idleness when there is a constitutional obligation to protect human rights. These phenomena will not be eliminated as long as existing disciplinary procedures remain idle. (...) The administration, reproducing the most backward reflexes of our society, often shows its worst face when dealing with members of minority groups (p. 70). The pathology of human rights in our country is mainly a problem of implementing existing constitutional and legal provisions rather than lack thereof (p. 69). It is common wisdom that in the administration prevails a feeling of impunity, that in some cases favors occasional illegal actions, or in other cases it perpetuates a status of generalized anomy and corruption (p.70)."

Finally, the Council of Europe's **European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI)**, in its **"Second Report on Greece"** –released on 27 June 2000- comes to similar conclusions with the OSCE HCNM and the Greek Ombudsman, and adds:

"There have been consistent reports that Roma/Gypsies, Albanians and other immigrants are frequently victims of misbehaviour on the part of the police in Greece. In particular, Roma/Gypsies are often reported to be victims of excessive use of force -in some cases resulting in death- ill treatment and verbal abuse on the part of the police. Discriminatory checks involving members of these groups are widespread. In most cases there is reported to be little investigation of these cases, and little transparency on the results of these investigations. Although most of these incidents do not generally result in a complaint being filed by the victim, when charges have been pressed the victims have reportedly in some cases been subjected to pressure to drop such charges. ECRI stresses the urgent need for the improvement of the response of the internal and external control mechanisms to the complaints of misbehaviour vis-à-vis members of minority groups on the part of the police." (p. 13).

In our detailed report previously submitted to the UN CERD (GHM & MRG-G **"Racial Discrimination And Violence Against Roma In Greece"** 31 July 2000), there are many examples of such negligence of the judicial and disciplinary authorities. Even in cases where there was conclusive and incriminating forensic and other evidence of torture (**Bekos and Kotropoulos** case) or murder (**Celal** case) of Roma at the hands of the police, that had led initially to serious indictments of police officers. The reports offers also ample documentation for the failure to implement the ambitious Framework Program mentioned before, as well as short references to the grave health problems of the tent-dwelling Roma and the assimilatory educational program with no respect for Romani language and culture of the Greek government.

We will agree with the Greek Ombudsman that for Greece to stop violating the human rights of the Roma (as well as of the other minorities and of the migrants), and to be in breach of Articles 2 through 7 of the UN ICERD, it takes one thing. As an early 20th century satiric columnist wrote, a new law with one article and one sentence: "We order that all existing laws" –and international conventions we would add- "be implemented strictly and without any failure."

Our NGOs have also produced extensive reports on the Roma of Albania, Bulgaria and Macedonia. Others will probably report today on Roma problems there. Though in some cases there is a need for legislative reform in these transition countries, most Roma problems reflect there as well the lack of political will to implement already existing laws, regulations and programs, as well as to actively and systematically fight widespread prejudice against Roma. All UN countries should be motivated to realize that a major yardstick by which their democracies will be judged must be the respect of the rights of the most vulnerable minority, usually the Roma. Then, and only then, will the Roma stand a chance to be treated equally before the law.

Reports (and related material) on Roma in Albania, Bulgaria, Greece and Macedonia are available at: <http://www.greekhelsinki.gr/special-issues-roma.html>