

**DECEMBER 1999 ACTIVITY REPORT
OF THE GHM ROMA OFFICE**

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<p>1.) Roma in Rio. The GHM and F. Stamos from the Prime Minister's Office for Quality of Life visit the settlements.</p>
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On December 1, 1999, GHM representatives Panayote Dimitras and Christina Rougheri, together with Mr. F. Stamos from the Prime Minister's Office for Quality of Life, visited Rio with the aim of initiating a dialogue among the municipal authorities, the Prefect of Patras, the University of Patras and the local Roma tent-dwellers. The GHM had made the preliminary contacts between the Prime Minister's Office and the local authorities and had suggested a field visit, following a report in the local press regarding the municipal decision to evict the Roma from Rio.

The GHM representatives and Mr. F. Stamos met with Mr. Vasilis Zervas (mayor of Rio), Mr. Christos Angelopoulos (president of the municipal council of Rio and deputy mayor), Mr. Vasilis Zervas (president of the Parents' Association in Rio), Mr. Alahiotis (Rector of the University of Patras), Mr. Seretis (Prefect of Patras), Mr. Kanistras and Mr. Katsifaras (deputy prefects), Ms. Raptis (local journalist) and some of the local Roma tent-dwellers.

The field visit showed that Roma are unwanted either by the local authorities, or by the local residents. Mr. Angelopoulos stated explicitly that Roma would not be tolerated within the borders of the municipality. The municipal decision on the eviction of the Roma is based on their alleged criminality and anti-social behavior condemned by the local residents and the University of Patras. Moreover, Mr. Angelopoulos implied that the municipality has no moral or other responsibility to provide for the Roma as the latter are no permanent residents of Rio, registered in the municipality, with the exception of two or three families. Mr. Zervas, president of the Parents' Association, referred to the alleged criminality and anti-social behavior of the Roma, as well as to

the neglect of their parental duty to send their children to school. In order to make his point Mr. Zervas drew parallels between Roma and Albanians. According to him, the Albanians have demonstrated a will to adapt to their new life style and to follow the mainstream trend, namely to rent houses, find jobs and send their children to school. Roma, on the other hand, prefer to live in tents and resort to criminality. The local community cannot accept this.

Roma in Rio live in three districts:

a) Platani

In the area of Platani, in a publicly owned land -property of the Organization of Workers' Housing- once occupied by an old gunpowder storehouse, live approximately ten Roma families with an average of five-six members each. They moved from the nearby camp, on the property of the regional hospital, where they had been living for about four years. They left their former site when it became overcrowded and found shelter in the old buildings of the gunpowder storehouse. They live without any infrastructure. They get water from one external tap. They do not have electricity, telephones, toilets and a sewage system. They are mainly involved in trade and the collection of recyclable material. They speak Romanes. None of their children attends school. When asked, they reply that they constantly move from place to place, not knowing where and for how long they would be in the region. Reportedly, two of the children in the camp used to go to the former community school of Kastritsi. The interviewed Roma said that a month ago, a traffic policeman had asked them to leave the place but they disobeyed the order.

As demonstrated by Mr. Angelopoulos and the mayor, Mr. Zervas, the wider area is undergoing reconstruction. A new high school was just built and a new primary school is underway. In the exact place of the Roma settlement, the Organization of Workers' Housing plans to build about 100 residencies. Moreover, the transfer of an old private school from the town of Patras to the area is also planned. Through this 'urban planning' demonstration, the mayor and the vice-mayor made clear that, even if they wanted to accommodate the Roma, there was no room for them. The mayor, Mr. Zervas, also stated that "it is not the municipality that creates problems to the Roma. On the contrary, it is the Roma who create problems to the municipality. They are unadaptable, they steal and do terrible things..."

b.) On the property of the regional hospital

Some two to seven Roma families have their camps to the south of the regional hospital, which belongs to the University of Patras. The number is not exact, because the Roma are constantly on the move and seem to come and go all the time.

c.) North of the regional hospital, near the Selemnos stream, within the borders of the former community of Kato Kastritsi

Three Roma families, who have been registered in the former community of Kastritsi and are nowadays residents of the municipality of Rio, live in wooden shacks. They get water, with the consent of the former local authority, from the nearby building, which used to be the community's office. These Roma families have been registered as permanent residents of Kastritsi. Because of that, the current municipal authority seriously considers allowing them to stay in Rio and helping them to find a suitable place to live. Reportedly, police officers came to the camp in the summer. Once, armed policemen arrived at 6 a.m., asking the Roma to provide papers showing ownership of the land. The Roma families responded that they had been given the permission to stay in the area by the former community authority.

Following this visit, the GHM, Mr. F. Stamos, the mayor and the deputy mayor of Rio had a meeting with the Rector of the University of Patras, Mr. Alahiotis. The Rector started with the statement that last year the situation had deteriorated because of the works taking place in Antirio -many Roma were compensated for losing their property in the area where Rio will be connected with Antirio through a bridge- and the eviction of a substantial number of Roma, especially from the camp in the Makriyani district. The number of Roma increased dramatically and their presence, within the borders of the University and the regional hospital, became more than evident and problematic. According to Mr. Alahiotis, robberies and damage of property happen every day and the university community can no longer tolerate them: "They know that they are entitled to a certain protection from the state and they play the fools... They constantly steal things. People have been arrested ... The other day they stole someone's wallet on the ground floor. In the mechanical engineering section, they stole a bag. They also took away our bench ... The University is an international place. How can one sympathize with people who trespass private land, who bring their animals inside our buildings? The presence of goats in the amphitheaters has turned the university into a laughing stock ... The University is a window, a mirror. We cannot afford cars to be hit by stones thrown by Gypsies." Mr. Alahiotis stressed that the Senate had decided to take measures against the Roma living on the University property, showing some sympathy only to the permanent residents. The University had already made a proposal to the municipality of Rio to make an exception to them and help them accommodate in the region. Mr. Alahiotis also stated that the University would never grant land to the Roma or to anyone else since all of its 2,600 acres of land are needed for the efficient functioning of the institution. A camp, close to the university or the regional hospital, is not a good solution to the problem. Even then the Roma would keep hanging around, bringing their trucks and animals in, causing problems and damaging things. In any case, the problem will not be solved with the construction of an organized camp in Rio. Roma crowds from the wider region would be attracted and urged to come there in search of a better life. There should be an overall solution to the Roma housing issue, at least in the Prefecture in question.

Mr. F. Stamos referred to the various existing programs for the integration of Roma, arguing that in each case progress depends seriously on the maturity and the goodwill of the local community and authorities. In this light, the money issue is not a problem, because funding for such programs can be secured through certain ministerial budgets. The problem of land is important but not insurmountable.

In the discussion with the Prefect, Mr. Seretis, and the deputy prefects, the housing problems of the Roma were analyzed thoroughly. Mr. Seretis agreed that Roma should be provided with equal opportunities, stating that whenever they were given the opportunity, they 'made miracles.' He brought as an indicative example the fact that the best students in Kato Ahaya are Roma. Mr. Seretis informed Mr. Stamos that the Prefect had tried to solve at least part of the existing problems. In Sayeika, which was brought by the GHM as an example of a destitute camp, the Prefect asked the local authorities to proceed with the infrastructure works. There, finding land for the Roma is not even an issue since most of them own plots of land. Apparently, the local community does not want the Roma and the authorities discourage the Roma from settling permanently in the region by depriving them of infrastructure. Moreover, in Makriyani the Prefect is making efforts to help the Roma leave the camp and settle in houses. The idea of temporary subsidies for their rent has been voiced. In addition, a suggestion was made by the Prefect to the Ministry of the Environment to make good use of the prefabricated houses, used for the earthquake victims of Aegio some years ago. The Prefect suggested to the Ministry for those houses to be given to the Roma tent-dwellers in the region. Nevertheless, the Ministry in its reply asked from the Prefect to pay 3 million drachmas per house, a sum of money, which is far too much for the Prefect's budget.

Mr. Seretis stated that the Prefect is willing to join these efforts, in cooperation with the Office for Quality of Life and the non-governmental organizations, so as to provide the Roma with the best possible options. "They are people like us, we are eager to help them." He also stated that oftentimes the local communities do not share this point of view and react against the settling of the Roma. Mr. Seretis made it clear that no eviction was going to take place, even less so a forceful eviction, unless the Roma are provided with viable alternative solutions. He also said that it is within the duties of the state and the local authorities to take care of the Roma because the future of Greece might be in them, as their birth rate is much higher than that of the rest of the population. In response to the comments made by Mr. Angelopoulos that there is no space for the Roma in Rio, Mr. Seretis said that it would be very good to have a model camp next to the schools that are to be built in Platani. In this way, Roma children would be urged to attend the classes and learn to love school. Finally, Mr. Seretis stated that at least four or five model camps would have to be built in order to avoid the concentration of Roma in one place and their isolation in one or two 'ghettos.'

In brief, the atmosphere in the Prefecture was very positive. Mr. Stamos explained that the issue of money should not be of primary importance, because his Office would support the Prefect. It was decided that the existing possibilities in Sayeika and Rio would be explored.

Following this meeting, the Prefecture issued a press release, summarizing the content of the discussion and declaring its will to provide local Roma with viable alternative solutions.

Press Release

The Prime Minister's Advisor, responsible for issues of Social Exclusion, Mr. F. Stamos, together with his associates, Christina Rougheri and Panayote Dimitras, visited today the Prefect of Ahaia, Mr. Stathis Athanasopoulos-Seretis.

During the meeting, the Prefect provided information on the problems, arising from the existence of numerous scattered Roma camps in the region. The Prefect also provided information on the action already taken. Mr. Stamos stated that the problem of the Roma camps is a bigger one and applies to the whole country. Finally, the Prefect decided to set up a committee to look into the existing possibilities of finding unoccupied land for the establishment of model camps and settlements as a means towards Roma's smooth integration into society.

Present at the meeting were also the deputy prefects, Mr. Andreas Kanistras and Apostolos Katsifaras and the deputy mayor of Rio, Mr. Christos Angelopoulos.

Note: The press release was obviously mistaken in presenting GHM's advocates as associates of the PM's Advisor. The confusion was probably triggered by the fact that the three of them visited the area in a joint mission.

In the end of the meeting, the GHM representatives and Mr. F. Stamos visited the camp in Riganocampos where 70 Roma families are reported to live without infrastructure on land owned by the university of Patras. It was decided that the land ownership in the wider district would be checked, in search of partners, who would be more cooperative than the University. The area was formerly used as a police range for shooting. That is why Mr. Stamos suggested that this part may actually belong to the Ministry of Public Order and not to the University. Moreover, there is a small military camp nearby. This means that there is yet another possible state proprietor in the district, the Ministry of Defense. All these possibilities are going to be explored further. The GHM has already asked the deputy prefect, Mr. Kanistras, to check the ownership status of the area.

On December 20, 1999, the local journalist, Vivi Raptis, contacted the GHM to provide information on the latest developments in Rio. Ms. Raptis stated that there was an article in the local press announcing that the Senate of the University of Patras and the Rector, Mr. Alahiotis, decided to allocate 20 acres in Riganocampos to a professor for pharmaceutical cultivation and the initiation of relevant university projects and studies. From the article it was not clear whether and to what extent this decision would affect the presence of Roma in the region.

The next day (21/12/1999), Vivi Raptis contacted the GHM again to inform the organization on another piece of news in the local press regarding the housing problems of the Kurdish refugees in Patras. According to this report, the government

is interested in transferring the refugees to camps, which would be built on public land. One of the suggested areas was near the Harandros stream close to the Roma-populated places in Rio. As this site is on the border between Rio and Patras its status is not absolutely clear. It may belong to either Rio or Patras. In any case it could be treated as a potential alternative solution for the local Roma. Following the conversation with Vivi Raptis, the GHM passed its information on to Mr. F. Stamos from the Prime Minister's Office for Quality of Life.

2.) The Ministry of Health and Social Care gave another 100 million drachmas for the continuation of the works in Gonou

On December 7, 1999, the Ministry of Health and Social Care gave another 100 million drachmas for the infrastructure works in the former military barracks of Gonou. So far, the Ministry has given 350 million drachmas and the government has already agreed on adding another 360 million for the works to be completed. The Ministry asked the Prefect of Thessaloniki to make an agreement with the contractor for the payment to be made upon completion of the work.

3.) Contacts with Mr. F. Stamos from the Prime Minister's Office

On December 7, 1999, Mr. Fredy Stamos contacted the GHM in order to get additional information on the regions, all over Greece, in which Roma communities are in need of land. The Office for Quality of Life intends to submit a dossier with the gathered information to the Public Land Society in order to have all possible Roma tent-dwelling communities included in the Greek state's plans of land use.

4.) Ano Liosia: Roma and the rats

On December 15, 1999, a TV report on MEGA Channel -a private TV station covering all of Greece, which has one of the highest ratings- covered the story of a school teacher, Mr. Nikolaides, who enchained himself once again in order to attract the attention of the media. Mr. Nikolaides chose this way to protest for losing his job as a schoolteacher. He had given up the mainstream school system, in which he was initially appointed, in order to work in the camps with Roma children. The protest prompted the media to show some interest in the destitute camp of Ano Liosia and the conditions under which local Roma tent-dwellers live. (The reports made references to the coexistence of people -especially children- with rats in the camp). The Mayor of Ano Liosia made a public statement that the municipality would provide prefabricated houses to the Roma within three days.