

Acceptance Speech, European Civil Rights Prize, Sinti and Roma

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'Reignite the Fight, and Take Injustice Personally'

Introduction

Secretary General Jagland, Members of Parliament, fellow laureates, ladies and gentlemen.

Amnesty International's Secretary General, Salil Shetty, is sorry that he could not be here today but has asked that I, as head of the European Institutions Office and part of the broader team that worked on these important issues, accept this prize on behalf of the movement. I am honoured and humbled to be here in the presence of so many inspiring human rights defenders.

I would like to thank and congratulate the thousands of Amnesty International activists, staff and volunteers who have worked tirelessly, taking injustice personally and fighting for the rights of Roma in Europe and across the world. I will detail shortly some of the important work Amnesty International has done protecting and promoting the rights of Roma, however it's essential to note that we did not do this alone. We worked alongside many Roma and non Roma organisations, Roma community and youth activists, as well as directly with individual Roma people suffering abuses to forward our joint calls for justice.

Today's award belongs to them as well. Indeed, as a human rights organisation, a key objective must always be to amplify the voices of people whose rights we are defending. Sometimes this is not possible, as those we advocate for are held in detention, or are in too much danger to voice their concerns directly due to their migration status. Thankfully

during the course of our work on the rights of Roma, we have had the opportunity to amplify strong voices of Roma people themselves.

Being in the European Parliament reminds me of one such occasion, exactly three years ago this week. Claudia Linda Zsiga, President of the Coastei Association - an organisation set up by a Roma community after being forcibly evicted in December 2010 by local authorities in Cluj-Napoca, Romania - delivered a powerful speech. She struck a chord on a very human level speaking out about how as a parent her fight for justice was also motivated by a drive to offer future generations a better and equal chance. She talked of the scandalous forced eviction she and those in her community had to bear, and also of the obstacles faced in equal access to education. In her words:

‘You have to be strong to live like this. You can’t give up. You have to fight for your rights! If you give up hope, then you also lose the last hope for your children!’

It is fitting to remind ourselves that despite some key wins, the fight for justice for Roma people is unfortunately far from over. So today I would like to use the honourable occasion of this award to reflect on how we can reignite the fight, and why we must take the injustice against Roma personally.

Situation of Roma in Europe – the fight for justice is not over

An estimated 10-12 million Roma live in Europe and remain one of the largest groups suffering discrimination and abuse at the hands of authorities and non-state actors. Throughout the EU, anti-Roma sentiment has become part of political discourse. This is reflected in policies that indirectly and directly target, stigmatize and discriminate against Roma communities. Roma across Europe continue to face precarious housing conditions, segregation and difficulties in access to education, violence and other human rights violations and abuses.

My daily job is in Brussels, where we see endless political declarations, action plans and national strategies aiming to counter discrimination against Roma. But these have had minimal impact on the lives of

millions of marginalized Roma – invariably because they were not accompanied by the necessary political will to implement them, and because they consistently failed to identify and tackle the main reasons behind the social exclusion of Roma - prejudice and racism. As a result, discrimination against Roma in housing, education, health and employment remains widespread.

Equal Access to Education is a human right

Today in Europe in 2016, Roma children are still denied equal access to education for no other reason than being Roma. Over-representation of Romani children in special classes for children with “mild mental disability” that often provide inferior education, segregation in mainstream Roma-only schools, bullying and harassment by peers and teachers of Romani children when placed in mixed educational settings still occur.

It is unacceptable in this day and age that a child should have to suffer such injustice. The real cost to our societies of unequal access to education is so high that it is difficult to estimate. Especially when we consider, as Nelson Mandela said that ‘education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world’.

Education is a human right that must be guaranteed to all children. Discrimination through segregated education is unlawful. It leads to poorer education and limits future employment opportunities, trapping Romani children in a vicious cycle of marginalisation and exclusion.

It is in the area of equal access to education that human rights groups including Amnesty International achieved a key success. In September 2014, one and a half years after Amnesty International and other civil society organisations called on the European Commission to begin infringement proceedings against the Czech government to tackle discrimination against Romani children in the education system, an infringement procedure was finally launched. This sent a clear message that discrimination would not be tolerated. We must remember that despite clear EU law against such discrimination, it took ten years before such a procedure was initiated, and that the European Court of Human

Rights as well as a number of UN bodies had already exposed and condemned these practices.

I remember that day in our office very well, the celebratory exclamations echoed through the corridors. One colleague who has worked for the organisation for many decades remarked that he had not heard such joy since Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet's arrest in 2004. Amnesty International had presented a petition with nearly 100,000 signatures, gathered in less than three months, calling on the Commission to take stronger action against EU member states failing to implement EU anti-discrimination legislation to protect Roma. These calls were based on evidence, gathered over a decade, of widespread unlawful discrimination against Romani children in the Czech education system - notably through segregation into schools for pupils with 'mild mental disabilities' or Roma-only schools, or classes offering lower educational standards.

Despite this refreshing success, Amnesty International and anyone concerned about equality is not fully satisfied that the Czech or the Slovakian governments, where an infringement procedure has been launched, have adequately responded. While the Czech and Slovak governments are engaging with the infringement proceedings and have passed much needed reforms, more needs to be done to tackle the core issue - the fact that Romani children are prevented from accessing the quality education they have the right to simply because they are Roma. The European Commission must keep up the pressure and indeed follow through with Court proceedings if necessary should governments continue to drag their feet.

Forced Evictions

Friends, do not be lured into a false sense that this is 'a central and eastern European problem', when it comes to discrimination for Roma in access to housing and forced evictions. States such as Italy have much to answer for.

Hundreds of thousands of Roma across Europe living in informal settlements continue to struggle to access social housing. They are vulnerable to forced evictions, which are of course in violation of

international human rights law. The phrase in English ‘to feel at home’ reflects how central to human security and dignity our home is, yet so many Roma people have their houses torn asunder before their eyes, finding themselves on the street or pushed on to an inadequate settlement. The Giugliano camp in Italy is a prime example. Set up by the local municipality next to a landfill containing toxic waste, it illustrates clearly the hopeless situation Roma are forced into by Italy’s unwillingness to provide adequate accommodation for its Romani population.

When a court ordered the removal of Roma from the perilous conditions of Giugliano, authorities had a chance to do the right thing. Instead they again opted for another camp as an alternative place to live, ignoring the warnings of non-governmental organisations such as OsservAzione that this policy promotes the heartless segregation of the Romani community.

Unfortunately, Giugliano is not an isolated case.

Italian authorities have abandoned men, women and children in a Roma-only camp next to Ciampino airport runway in Rome, and haven’t provided suitable alternative accommodation for these people even after the Rome Civil Court ruled the relocation discriminatory.

Forced evictions of hundreds of residents from the camps of Lungo Stura Lazio in Turin and Via Idro in Milan in the last year – again without providing adequate alternative housing – further underlines the prejudicial horror show that accommodation for Roma in Italy has become. As is sadly evident our fight in this and similar cases across Europe is far from over and demands the attention of national and regional institutions. Amnesty International remains committed to working on these issues for years to come, and has very recently launched a campaign against segregation in camps, forced evictions and discrimination in access to housing in Italy.

Ladies and gentlemen, equality is a high form of freedom, and freedom underpins the dignity of humankind. It is the cornerstone of justice and of any just society. The great Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., when setting out his vision of a non-racial society in his historic speech in Washington D.C

in 1963, rooted his passionate appeal and belief in a future. *'I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.'* In his words when all children of different creeds and backgrounds could hold hands and walk together, only then could he proclaim that he was "free at last!"

King's powerful image reflects his understanding that the freedom of any one group of people is inextricably bound with the freedom of all those around them. It is striking that this notion, so strongly associated with the Civil Rights Movement in America, is still as relevant today when we speak of the civil rights of Roma.

Thank you again for the honour of this prize, which Amnesty International shall use as a reminder of why we must take injustice against Roma personally and reignite our fight for equality – because our freedom and theirs is one, and because we cannot rest until we are all free.