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France: Saint Ouen forced eviction is the latest instance of a cruel policy with dire human rights consequences

An informal settlement in Saint Ouen (Seine-Saint-Denis), reported by media as one of the largest Roma camps in France with an estimated 800 people living in it at one point, was forcibly evicted on the morning of 27 November 2013. Media reports estimated that of the approximately 250 people evicted on 27 November, about 70 were children. The vast majority of evicted inhabitants were reportedly left homeless, with nowhere to live, as temperatures dropped to 7 C at the onset of winter.

Amnesty International expressed its concerns once again that French authorities – both central and local – continue to flout international human rights law by conducting such forced evictions. Evictions like this can have disastrous consequences: they render hundreds of people homeless, and leave them exposed to inclement conditions and vulnerable to further human rights violations. Amnesty International was particularly concerned by the negative impact of the eviction on vulnerable groups among those evicted, such as children attending school and people with significant health needs. The eviction took place despite clear guidance to prefects in the circular of 26 August 2012, encouraging them to pay particular attention to access to vaccinations and pre-natal care. The organization regards the forced eviction carried out in Saint Ouen as the latest instance in a cruel policy of forced evictions of informal settlements across France.

The eviction in Saint Ouen was enforced by police and bailiffs acting on the instruction of the Prefect of Seine Saint Denis, following a court order by the Tribunal de Grande Instance in Bobigny on 2 October 2013. The court granted the order at the request of the landowners, the French rail transportation networks SNCF and RFF who sought the return of their land, and by the Mayor of Saint Ouen who argued that there was a real safety risk arising from settlements on or near the railway tracks. NGO and press reports stated that the informal settlement, on wasteland near a heating plant, was first inhabited during the summer of 2013, following large scale forced evictions of other Roma camps across the greater Parisian region.

The circular of 26 August 2012, despite its many shortcomings, remains discretionary and as a result, prefects are not obliged to follow it. Amnesty International continues to call on French authorities to set in place effective safeguards to prevent forced evictions, including amending the circular of 26 August 2012 to:

- Ensure that no one is made homeless as a result of being evicted from an informal settlement and offer all the inhabitants suitable shelter or alternative housing several days before eviction operations are due to start.
- Ban evictions from informal settlements during the winter break that applies to other evictions (1 November – 15 March)
- Ensure that there is genuine consultation with the people concerned and that they are able to propose alternative solutions for themselves.
- Ensure that the people concerned receive adequate information about eviction operations within a reasonable time frame.

French authorities must also ensure access to the minimum essential services required to assure the dignity of those living in informal settlements, including a water supply, refuse collection and access to adequate sanitation, rather than using the absence of these as an excuse

for carrying out an eviction, and ensure continued access to the rights to education and health care.

In September 2013, Amnesty International published a report “Told to move on: Forced evictions of Roma in France,” which examined repeated forced evictions of informal settlements inhabited by Roma in greater Paris, Lille and Lyon. The report, which followed a 2012 report, “Chased away: Forced evictions of Roma in Ile-de-France,” found that French authorities continued to disregard their international human rights law obligations by carrying out forced evictions. Under international human rights law, evictions can only be carried out when appropriate procedural protections are in place; adequate alternative accommodation provided; and relocated residents offered compensation for all losses.

Publications

Told to move on: Forced evictions of Roma in France, AI Index EUR 21/007/2013, September 2013, <http://amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR21/007/2013/en>

France: Chased away: Forced evictions of Roma in Ile-de-France, AI Index: EUR 21/012/2012, November 2012, <http://amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR21/012/2012/en>

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