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Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance, follow-up and implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action

Written statement* submitted by Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[03 June 2020]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.

Roma in danger: Hate speech and antiziganism on the rise in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic

The current situation of the Roma is a cause for great concern. Across Europe, the Roma communities are particularly vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19 – and they are, with around ten to twelve million people, one of the largest and most forgotten risk groups. Even before the pandemic, the Roma living in central and south-eastern Europe – especially in Slovakia, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Kosovo – were already massively discriminated against by the police, the judiciary, and the government, in the social and healthcare sectors, and in society at large. Roma in these countries suffer from extreme poverty, segregation, and racism. In the current pandemic, Roma settlements are bound to be hit hard by the virus, as the people often live in confined spaces without access to clean water and electricity, and without access to healthcare. Further, the Roma are increasingly treated as scapegoats for the COVID-19 pandemic in countries such as Slovakia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, and Serbia. In Slovakia, they are currently facing increased hate speech, stigmatizing measures, and racist violence.

The COVID-19 pandemic has relentlessly exposed the prevailing antiziganism and the political failures of recent years regarding the societal integration of the Roma people. According to reports by Society for Threatened Peoples (STP) in Bosnia and Herzegovina, it is simply not possible to practice social distancing in the Roma settlements throughout the Western Balkans – particularly in Serbia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo – mainly due to the poor infrastructure. Due to the curfews, many of the adults are no longer able to work. Thus, they are under increased socio-economic threat: apart from the risk of infection, there is also a high risk of starvation. The closure of schools is another serious problem: Roma children do not have the necessary technical means to attend school lessons via the Internet, and they are suffering from various other forms of prejudice and stigmatization through exclusion. According to our office in Sarajevo, they are sometimes denied medical assistance as they often have no health insurance and no money for medicines.

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, Slovakia and Romania adopted additional restrictive measures explicitly for Roma settlements. In Slovakia, for example, masked soldiers are now patrolling Roma settlements to ensure that the Roma living there stick to the restrictions on movement. As a result of mass tests that found positive results, entire Roma settlements in the country were collectively quarantined, rather than isolating affected individuals. There are similarly worrying reports from Romania and Bulgaria. In these countries, the social media are full of accusations of guilt, general suspicion, and racist comments about Roma in connection with the coronavirus.

Currently, Roma throughout Europe are mostly left to their own devices and forgotten by the governments. Due to disease, poverty, and discrimination, their lives are at risk. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations Human Rights Council should, more than ever, demand all states and their local administrative authorities to actively protect and to support this threatened and vulnerable minority.

Society for Threatened Peoples therefore calls upon the UN Human Rights Council to:

- urge the European governments to adopt a human rights-based approach to the pandemic and to show strong solidarity with the Roma, especially now. Aid measures must be taken to guarantee basic medical supplies for prevention, sanitation, better hygiene, and food safety in Roma settlements as quickly as possible, but also to ensure that the Roma will have access to social services and basic infrastructure as well as to educational and integration measures;
- take effective action against hate speech and racist violence against the Roma. Antiziganism must be publicly condemned in all areas of public life; the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) must be informed about the current situation of the Roma, review it, and initiate special measures to combat discrimination and hate speech efficiently and sustainably;
- provide the Roma settlements with information material, also in the Romani language, to educate the people and to prevent infection, and to ensure that the Roma themselves are involved in all relevant processes, taking their specific needs into account;
- develop long-term strategies, in addition to short-term measures, to improve not only the current situation of the Roma, but also their general prospects, so that profound structural problems can be overcome. European states must be called upon to pursue a binding inclusion plan that guarantees equal participation in the areas of education, health, housing, and employment, and to ensure that the existing Roma settlements are modernized;
- initiate partnerships with municipalities in south-eastern and central Europe (Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Serbia, Kosovo, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, and Slovakia) to offer them assistance.

