

Press Statement
21 September 1993

Statement of the HCNM on his study of the Roma in the CSCE region

PRAGUE, 21-23 September 1993 - In view of the seriousness of the situation of the Roma (Gypsies) in the CSCE region, the High Commissioner on National Minorities was requested at a meeting of the Committee of Senior Officials on 26-28 April 1993 "to study the social, economic and humanitarian problems relating to the Roma population in some participating States and the relevance of these problems to the Mandate of the High Commissioner (Helsinki Decisions, Chapter II, para. 2-7) and to report there on to the Committee of Senior Officials through the Chairman-in-Office. In the discussion, it was furthermore stated that these problems, which fall into the larger category of migration problems, could also have an international dimension." Drawing on High Commissioner contacts with Roma representatives and government authorities charged with Roma affairs, this report relies on information available through secondary sources, including reports by and interviews with researchers, advocates, and officials familiar with these issues. This report does not in fact offer new data derived from primary research; it is instead an overview of significant Roma-related issues and suggestions for further steps to be considered by the CSCE.

In sum, the study reports that the Roma, who number at least 7-8 million in the CSCE region, are in many ways a distinctive population that has formed a constituent part of European societies, in some places for over 600 years. Though comprising a heterogeneous set of communities that should be understood in their specificity, the Roma have historically experienced -- and continue to experience -- grave challenges to the enjoyment of basic rights and to full participation in the social, economic, and political life of countries in the region. At best the historical experience of the Roma in the region has been ambivalent, as relations between the Roma and non-Roma communities and between the Roma and political authorities have been complex and varied. On the one hand, this interaction has been characterized by mutual (though perhaps uneasy) socio-cultural accommodation and economic symbiosis. On the other hand, often based on prejudice against the Roma due to their distinctive socio-cultural characteristics, numerous discriminatory policies and practices supported by government authorities have historically been carried out against the Roma. These included enslavement, well into last century, and other measures aimed at destroying traditional Romani culture or the Roma themselves (e.g., forced settlement, assimilation, and sterilization (of Roma women); mass deportations; and even systematic extermination).

Currently, due to complex factors including historical discrimination against them, the vast majority of Roma could be regarded as occupying an extremely vulnerable position in the societies, economies, and political systems of the region. This overall condition manifests itself in widespread and acute poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, lack of formal education, substandard housing, and other problems among the Roma. Furthermore, persistent anti-Roma prejudice has also found renewed expression in the collective "scapegoating" of the Roma for the ills of society-at-large and has served as the backdrop to numerous attacks against Roma and their property in recent years.

This difficult situation may be contributing to the attractiveness of migration for some Roma, much as similar hopes for an improved "quality of life," including considerations of personal security, have often guided other migrants from the general population. At the same time, the initial post-1989 period has witnessed the greater feasibility of international migration for a significant number of people, predominantly in eastern and southeastern parts of the CSCE region. Cold War restrictions on mobility are no longer in place, and the relative stability and prosperity of western Europe, coupled with increased uncertainty and difficulties elsewhere in the region, have prompted sizeable outflows. Higher levels of migration, involving Roma as well, have led to additional problems associated with regulating migration by transit and receiving countries. New measures have been introduced recently to tighten east-to-west migration controls.

In view of these difficult conditions, the governments of the CSCE participating States, with assistance available through international channels, should be encouraged to devise and implement constructive policies for addressing the serious social, economic, and humanitarian problems of the Roma, including attacks and discrimination against them. Not to confront these difficulties now is only likely to lead to even more serious problems for the Roma, for governments, and for the region in the coming years, particularly if economic or political conditions deteriorate sharply.

While underscoring the need for measures within each participating State to address the situation of the Roma, the report proposes a number of general and specific recommendations for the CSCE participating States to consider on this matter. These include:

- Implementing their CSCE commitments relevant to the situation of the Roma, particularly the measures agreed to and elaborated in the Document of the Copenhagen Meeting of the Conference on the Human Dimension, Chapter IV, under para. 40 and its sub-sections.
- Devising and implementing special policies for addressing certain Roma-related issues in such areas as employment, education, health care, and general welfare with the participation of affected communities.
- Highlighting the relevance of the Human Dimension of the CSCE, under which Roma issues generally fall, in assisting participating States to improve, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of policies at the national and local levels aimed at addressing the problems of the Roma, and underscoring the importance of international cooperation among multilateral organizations and States in making appropriate material and technical assistance available for these efforts.

Devoting proper attention to migration, refugees, and related issues and considering, if the State has not already done so, ratification of relevant international instruments, including, among others, the 1961 United Nations Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness and the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.