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Mr. Prokopis PAVLOPOULOS
Minister of the Interior, Public Administration and Decentralisation
Stadiou 27, Dragatsaniou 2
Athens
Greece

Strasbourg, 19 December 2007

Dear Minister,

I am writing to you on the situation of Roma in Greece following my recent visit to Athens on 7 December, where I also met with the Secretary General of your Ministry, Mr. Patroklos Georgiades. On 8 December, I attended a Conference on Roma in Nafplion organised by the Office of the Greek Ombudsman, Mr. Yorgos Kaminis, in co-operation with my Office. While in Nafplion, I had an opportunity to speak with many Roma men and women, to listen to their concerns and to visit two settlements in the vicinity of the town to see for myself the conditions in which many Roma still live in Greece.

Both the meeting with the Secretary General and the Conference provided me with useful information on the progress made to improve the situation of Roma in Greece, the efforts of which I believe have started to bear some fruit. But it also gave me a clear picture of the many outstanding problems. One of the main conclusions of the Conference was that the housing and living conditions of Roma continue to be very poor and that urgent action is required to remedy the situation. Without adequate housing conditions, the progress in other areas, such as education and health, will be difficult to achieve.

During my meeting with the Secretary General, I was provided with updated information concerning the efforts made to implement the 2002-2008 Integrated Action Plan for Social Inclusion of Roma in Greece (hereinafter referred to as "IAP"). Representatives of a number of other ministries involved joined us in the meeting. I very much appreciated the frank discussions and the constructive spirit of the meeting and I welcomed the openness of the Secretary General, who admitted that there still are many problems, in particular in the areas of housing, education and employment. The Secretary General also stressed the need to evaluate the IAP and assess the results achieved since the beginning of its' implementation. This is indeed necessary as the IAP is drawing to a close in 2008 and a new programme is being planned.

The Secretary General was also very clear that while in some municipalities good examples are being set and tangible results are being achieved, many local authorities do not act in accordance with international human rights standards.

In this regard, I would like to draw your urgent attention to the current situation in the Athens municipality, in Votanikos, where a large number of Roma seem to be facing imminent eviction (from VIAMAX building and possibly other locations as well). This case has been known since at least summer 2007. However, to date, no solution for an alternative and acceptable accommodation has been found.

Needless to say, I am extremely concerned of the grave consequences such an action would cause on these vulnerable people, many of whom are children. I am well aware of and welcome the efforts taken by the Greek Ombudsman to assist the authorities and mediate in finding a solution, which would allow for a long term solution and avoid evictions. Regrettably, I am informed that the local and regional authorities, who bear the main responsibility on the ground, have so far either not reacted at all or failed to take adequate measures in response to the constructive proposals made by the Greek Ombudsman.

The right to adequate housing is a fundamental right. It is protected by several international legal instruments including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the

European Convention on Human Rights and the European Social Charter. Furthermore, the right to adequate housing has to be ensured without discrimination.

I acknowledge that there can be situations, where it can be justified that people have to move from where they are residing, if they are occupying the property illegally. However, the manner in which such initiatives are prepared and implemented should be in accordance with agreed human rights norms and procedural safeguards. Alternatives to evictions – or removal by “administrative sanction” due to illegal occupation of property – should be sought in genuine consultation with the people affected and adequate resettlement alternatives have to be offered by responsible authorities.

This, apparently, has not been the case in Votanikos despite the fact that this problem has been known to the responsible authorities for a considerable amount of time. This is not acceptable in any conditions and the measures envisaged thus far could bear the gravest consequences, especially during winter months. I therefore ask you to do everything possible to ensure that the local and regional authorities take urgent measures to find and offer adequate alternative accommodation and that the evictions are postponed until such time as a solution is found.

I will follow with great attention the outcome of these cases and would like to request further information on the measures you have taken to ensure that these and other vulnerable Roma are not evicted from their dwellings without adequate protection and alternative accommodation.

I look forward to working with you and with other Hellenic authorities in our common efforts to improve the protection of human rights of the Roma in Greece.

Yours sincerely,

Thomas Hammarberg

CC: Yorgos Kaminis, Ombudsman