

Continued discrimination against Roma and other violations of their basic rights, especially with regard to housing, were among the main human rights concerns in Greece. The degrading living conditions of the Roma, combined with governmental inaction to improve them, resulted in Greece becoming the first European Union member state to receive the Housing Rights Violator Award presented by the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), a Geneva-based NGO dealing with housing issues and evictions.¹ What is more, Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM, IHF member) as well as state and court officials were subjected to harassment and prosecution for their activities to defend the Roma's right to adequate housing.

Racism and xenophobia were among other serious human rights issues. A highly publicized gang rape of a 16-year-old pupil of Bulgarian origin, followed by racist insults and threats against the victim forcing her and her family to leave the community,² revealed the prevailing racial and xenophobic atmosphere. The media's inappropriate and sensationalist manner of reporting on the issue further incited the already existing undertones of intolerance.

A report by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) published in December shed light on the persisting problems of police ill-treatment, infringements of the basic rights of detainees, and poor conditions in many prisons and detention facilities.

Violence against women and domestic violence remained high on the human rights agenda because of prevalent attitudes toward women and their roles in society. In 2006, there were no governmental institutions to protect their rights and to prosecute any crimes committed against them, though draft legislation was being prepared.

Torture and inhuman or degrading treatment

Incidents of abuse of power amounting to torture by law enforcement officials brought to the light once more serious human rights violations committed by police officers, as well as the unwillingness of Greek authorities to openly denounce and punish such violations.

The CPT published in December a highly critical report based on its visit to Greece in 2005. It stated that a considerable number of persons interviewed by the delegation alleged they had been ill-treated by police officers. The alleged ill-treatment consisted mostly of kicks, punches and blows with batons or various other objects, often inflicted during questioning. There were also allegations about the use of excessive force at the time of arrest. According to the CPT, in some cases the ill-treatment alleged could be considered as amounting to torture and the conditions at some police establishments amounting to inhuman and/or degrading treatment.

The CPT particularly emphasized the need to respect the fundamental rights of detainees to inform a close relative or another third party of their choice of their situation, and to have access to a lawyer and a doctor - rights that were all too often not respected in Greece. For example, in a number of cases detainees had been denied access to a lawyer had been delayed for periods up to three days. In most of these cases, the persons concerned alleged that they were ill-treated during their arrest and interrogation. Many of these persons were foreigners.³

Conditions in the detention facilities for illegal migrants in Athens, in the Evros region and on the islands of Chios and Mytilini were of particular concern to the CPT. Most of the facilities visited were in a poor state of repair, unhygienic and lacking in basic amenities.

The CPT noted that prisons in Greece remained overcrowded and offered only an impoverished regime for prisoners. Prison health care services also required further investment. While few cases of physical ill treatment of prisoners by staff were brought to the attention of the CPT, inter-prisoner violence appeared to be on the rise.⁴

Minority rights

The Roma

Widespread discrimination against Roma, particularly in the field of housing, continued in 2006.⁵ COHRE gave Greece one of its 2006 Housing Rights Violator Awards for the country's systematic policy of forced evictions and its practice of ignorance of decisions from regional and international human rights bodies. The award cites "pervasive and persistent discrimination" against the Roma in access to housing and other basic services, such as water and electricity, as well as the segregation and forced evictions as practiced by local authorities. It was explicitly stated that "the shacks of the Roma in Patras, Athens or

Aspropyrgos are no different from those in slums in Nairobi or Manila."⁶

◆ Roma houses were bulldozed in a "clean-up" of two Roma settlements, Riganokambos and Makriyiannis, by the local authorities in Patras - a city selected as the cultural capital of Europe for 2006. Since July, 400 Roma, among them the family of Antonis Georgakopoulos with six children (see photo), have lost their homes. The family was not offered new housing and had to sleep in their pickup truck. Apart from police conducting patrols to force out the few last residents, rubble is reported to being dumped on the settlements.⁷

The European Committee of Social Rights (ECSR) of the Council of Europe concluded, for the second year in a row, that Greek policies on housing of Roma breached article 16 (right to adequate housing) of the European Social Charter and that Greece has not taken adequate measures to rectify the violation. The ECSR further noted that Roma continued to be evicted from settlements without being offered alternative housing.⁸



The family of Antonis Georgakopoulos, with six children, was left homeless after their shack in Patras was bulldozed in September 2006. © Niki Kitsantonis

Women's rights

Violence against women

A draft law to counter domestic violence was published in October. The Hellenic Republic National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR)⁹ considered the law a positive step, but weak in some areas. For example, the bill failed to address "violence against women" directly (instead the term "domestic violence" was used) leaving the entire situation to be gender neutral. In addition the bill did not provide a ministry for family welfare, meaning that cases of violence against women would still be dealt only by prosecutors and police officers although law enforcement officials have been inefficient and inappropriate in their dealings with domestic violence, and violence against women. The law was enacted in January 2007 (L3500/2007) without the amendments proposed by NGOs.

The NCHR also mentioned the fact that the Greek government has not met the four deadlines given to instigate the EU's framework regulations (L82/1/22-3-2001 and directive 2004/80/EC relating to compensation to crime victims). The deadlines were 22 March 2002, 22 March 2004, 1 January 2006, and 22 March 2006.

The weaknesses of the draft law stemmed largely from the fact that law enforcement and other public officials were not expected to be able to implement it effectively. While the police manual from 2005 offered information on how to deal with domestic violence, there were no specifically trained officers at each police station to deal with such cases. Additionally, witnesses and victims were not provided adequate protection while prosecutors were not given the right to issue restraining orders to prevent further abuse. The lack of an institution or ministry for family affairs or women and children also meant that there were no shelters that women could voluntarily go to in order to avoid domestic violence and a lack of infrastructure to see that they were properly prosecuted.

In addition, prevailing attitudes made fighting violence against women difficult. Many people still believed that women cannot be raped if they are within a marriage, an attitude supported by Greek Orthodox scriptures and reflected in the draft law which does not provide for adequate protection against marital rape.

SOURCES FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

- ♦ Greek Helsinki Monitor – Minority Rights Group/Greece, at www.greekhelsinki.gr/bhr/english/index.html

Publications:

- ♦ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT), *Report to the Government of Greece on the visit to Greece carried out by the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT), from 27 August to 9 September 2005*, CPT/Inf (2006) 41, 20 December 2006, at www.cpt.coe.int/documents/grc/2006-41-inf-eng.htm
- ♦ Greek Helsinki Monitor, in partnership with the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), Minority Rights Group-Greece (MRG-G), the Panhellenic Confederation of Greek Roma (PACONGR) and the Greek Gypsy Union (GGU), *Greece: Continuing Wi-*

despread Violation of Roma Housing Rights, October 2006, http://cm.greekhelsinki.gr/uploads/2006_files/greece_roma_report_october_2006.zip

- ♦ Interministerial Commission for Roma Affairs chaired by the Ministry of the Interior, Public Administration and Decentralisation, *Integrated Action Plan for the Social Inclusion of Greek Roma (years 2002-2008)*, adopted on December 2002.
- ♦ Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe, *Follow-up report on the Hellenic Republic (2002-2005): Assessment of the progress made in implementing the recommendations of the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights*, CommDH (2006) 13, 29 March 2006, at www.coe.int/t/commissioner/WCD/docsbycountry_en.asp#
- ♦ European Committee of Social Rights (ESCR) of the Council of Europe, *Conclusions XVIII-1 (Greece), articles 1, 12, 13, 16 and 19 of the European Social Charter*, 2006, at www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/esc/3_reporting_procedure/2_recent_conclusions/1_by_state/Greece_index.asp#TopOfPage
- ♦ Niki Kitsantonis, "Roma in Greece find limits to cultural diversity", *International Herald Tribune*, 24 October 2006, at www.iht.com/articles/2006/10/23/news/roma.php
- ♦ OSCE Human Dimension Implementation Meeting (HDIM), *Statement on Roma Rights in Greece*, at www.osce.org/item/21508.html
- ♦ Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions website, at www.cohre.org/
- ♦ COEHRE/GHM joint media release, "Greece named a Housing Rights Violator for persistently violating rights of Roma communities to adequate housing," 5 December 2006, at <http://cm.greekhelsinki.gr/index.php?sec=194&cid=2938>
- ♦ Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM), *Parallel Report on Greece's Compliance with the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, July 2006, at http://cm.greekhelsinki.gr/uploads/2006_files/ghm-mrgg_cedaw_july_2006_domestic_violence.doc

Endnotes

- ¹ See COHRE website at www.cohre.org/view_page.php?page_id=237
- ² *Independent*, Elinda Labropoulou, "Greece horrified by racist gang rape in school," at <http://news.independent.co.uk/europe/article1956559.ece>.
- ³ European Committee for the Prevention of Torture (CPT), *Report to the Government of Greece*.
- ⁴ CPT, "Council of Europe Anti-Torture Committee publishes report on Greece," 20 December 2006, at www.cpt.coe.int/documents/grc/2006-12-20-eng.htm.
- ⁵ For an overview of the situation of the Roma community in Greece, see *Greece: Continuing Widespread Violation of Roma Housing Rights*, October 2006.
- ⁶ COHRE/MHM, "Greece named a Housing Rights Violator for persistently violating rights of Roma communities to adequate housing." See also COEHRE, *Forced Evictions: Violations of Human Rights-Global Survey No 10*.
- ⁷ *International Herald Tribune*, Niki Kitsantonis, "Roma in Greece find limits to cultural diversity," 24 October 2006, at www.iht.com/articles/2006/10/23/news/roma.php.
- ⁸ ESCR, *Conclusions XVIII-1 (Greece)*. See also GHM "Statement on Roma rights in Greece."
- ⁹ "NCHR Comments on the Draft Bill 'on combating domestic violence'" February 2006, included in "Report 2005" pp. 231-244, www.nchr.gr/media/zip/nchr_report_2005.zip