

European Commission Standpoint Fails to Address Discriminatory Nature of Fingerprinting in Italy

Budapest, 9 September 2008: Yesterday, two leading human rights groups asked the European Commission (EC) to clarify its position on the mass fingerprinting of Roma in Italy.

In a letter to European Commissioner Jacques Barrot, the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) and the Open Society Justice Initiative (OSJI) expressed concern that the EC was endorsing Italy's plan to forcibly fingerprint all Roma living in the country. The groups noted that such fingerprinting would be a form of discrimination because it targets people based solely on their ethnicity.

According to media reports, the EC approved the fingerprinting plan because the Italian government is not seeking data based on ethnic origin or religion. However, the EC has not disclosed information on how it arrived at its controversial decision.

"We have two concerns arising from the statements of the Commission's spokesperson," said Savelina Danova, acting executive director of the ERRC. "The EC's reported position endorses discriminatory measures by the Italian government, and in reaching its conclusions the EC was not at all transparent."

In their letter, the groups expressed concern that the EC's endorsement of the Italian government's actions would set a dangerous precedent and would stigmatise Roma in Italy, possibly exposing them to gross human rights violations. Neither the Italian government's explanation of the fingerprinting measures nor the EC's legal analysis of whether those measures are compatible with EU law have been made public.

"Singling out a group for increased police scrutiny based only on ethnicity is clearly discriminatory and a violation of international human rights law," said James A. Goldston, OSJI executive director. "The question is why the EC would support such discrimination."

The ERRC filed a lawsuit in Italy in July, requesting a declaration on the illegality of the emergency measures implemented by the Italian government leading to the fingerprinting of Roma, and an end to the practice.

In their letter, the rights groups called on the EC to make public both the Italian authorities' report explaining the fingerprinting measures, as well as the EC's analysis of the information leading to its endorsement of the plan. The groups urged the EC to proceed with a thorough scrutiny of the situation of Roma in Italy and take the necessary legal steps to enforce compliance of the Italian state with non-discrimination standards contained in EU law.

The full text of the letter is available at: <http://www.errc.org/cikk.php?cikk=2980>.

Background information on the situation of Roma in Italy and developments in the course of 2007 and 2008 are available at: <http://www.errc.org/cikk.php?cikk=2958>.

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