

Condemned the Italian government for abuses suffered by Roma communities

Currently an estimated 160,000 Roma and Sinte live in Italy, of whom approximately 70,000 (predominantly Sinte) are Italian citizens. Migrant Roma in Italy come overwhelmingly from South-Eastern Europe, in particular the countries of the former Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Romania. Many immigrant Roma have been in Italy for several generations, but lack citizenship or even residence permits. As a matter of policy, Italian authorities have in the past racially segregated Roma in the area of housing. Underpinning the Italian Government's approach to the housing of Roma is the conviction that Roma are "nomads", despite a lack of such culture among the majority.

Many Roma and Sinte in Italy live in substandard conditions, without basic infrastructure. Some live in squalid "camps" or ghettos that are "authorised", meaning state-approved and provided. Others are forced to squat in abandoned buildings or set up camps along roads or in open spaces. These individuals can be evicted at any time, and often are. Their settlements are deemed "illegal" or "unauthorised". Where Italian authorities have expended resources on Roma, this has in general not been aimed at integrating Roma into society. Instead, authorities establish "temporary housing containers", in many cases surrounded by high walls, isolating the Roma from non-Romani Italians.

Commencing in late 2006 and intensifying in the second half of 2007, Italian officials have adopted a series of laws, decrees and policies which clearly target or have a disparate impact on Roma living in Italy, and appear aimed at pressuring a segment of the immigrant Romani community to leave Italy. These threats have been heightened following elections in April 2008 and the formation in May of a new right-wing national government including extremist xenophobic and racist elements, as well as success in local elections by the extreme right in several municipalities including Rome.

The new government has acted on its anti-Romani commitments by enacting explicitly racist laws, ordinances and decrees. On 21 May 2008, the Council of Ministers of the Italian Government, meeting in Naples, passed a new emergency decree defining the mere presence of Roma in the areas of Campania, Lazio, and Lombardy as a state of emergency. In addition, on 28 June, the Interior Minister revealed a plan for fingerprinting all Roma residents in camps, including children, insisting the plan was a solution to inadequate housing problems and rising crime rates.

Perhaps of greatest concern has been the new government's studious tolerance – amounting to tacit encouragement – of a wave of violent racist vigilante acts carried out against Roma and Sinte in Italy. On 13 May 2008, assailants burned a Romani camp in Naples to the ground, causing the approximately 800 residents to flee while Italians stood by and cheered. Only two weeks later, on 28 May, the same camp was set on fire for the second time by unknown perpetrators. Despite this recent history Italian authorities did little to secure the Roma and their homes from a mob attack.

Finally, a number of high profile instances of mass eviction/destruction of Romani camps have taken place around Italy. For example, on 6 June 2008, Italian authorities destroyed the Testaccio Romani camp in Rome, which housed some 120 Romani individuals, including 40 children. According to reports, many of the inhabitants of the camp had reportedly been transferred from a previously destroyed camp in Rome's Saxa Rubra area. The persons concerned are reportedly Italian citizens. No adequate alternative housing was provided.

COHRE is therefore presenting a 2008 Housing Rights Violator Award to the Italian Government, as a result of a range of acts and omissions, including a pattern and practice of racially discriminatory forced evictions of Roma from housing and expulsions from country; systemic racially segregated housing maintained as a matter of government policy of “camps for nomads”; extremely substandard housing conditions for Romani migrants and others regarded as “Gypsies”; failure to move persons to safe housing despite manifest and demonstrated threats to health and life, and despite evident availability of resources; systematic destruction of informal housing of Romani migrants, together with unremedied destruction of property; failure to rehouse evicted persons, together with other measures to enforce homelessness, undertaken with explicit racial animus; failure to tackle widespread racial discrimination in the mainstream rental housing market; demonstrable retrogression in the implementation of international legal obligations in the area of the right to housing; and a clear failure by the Government to speak out against extremist abuses.