

17 March 2011

Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán
Minister of Interior, Sándor Pintér
Minister of State for Social Inclusion, Zoltán Balog
Parliamentary Committee on Human Rights, Minority, Civic and Religious Affairs
Chairman, Tamás Lukács
Parliamentary Committee on Defence and Internal Security Chairman, Máté Kocsis
Member of Parliament, Ágnes Osztolykán
Parliamentary Commissioner for National and Ethnic Minorities, Ernő Kállai



Dear Excellencies,

The European Roma Rights Centre, Amnesty International and Human Rights First are writing to express our concern about the reports of ongoing harassment of the Romani residents of Gyöngyöspata by a vigilante organisation known as Szebb Jövőért Polgárőr Egyesület (Civil Guard Association for a Better Future) for more than two weeks.

According to media and reports from organisations who have been monitoring the situation, representatives of the Szebb Jövőért Polgárőr Egyesület have been patrolling the town of Gyöngyöspata, in north-eastern Hungary since 1 March. At a 6 March Jobbik rally in the town, at which Gábor Vona, the head of Jobbik spoke about “Gypsy Terror” and several thousand people dressed in black military clothing marched through the town, the tensions increased significantly. The Szebb Jövőért Polgárőr Egyesület are reported to have followed the Romani residents everywhere they went and to have intimidated them daily. They reportedly prevented the Romani residents from sleeping by shouting during the night, threatened them with weapons and dogs and followed them every time when they left their houses. Residents are becoming desperate and are afraid to venture out to go to school, to work or even to buy food. According to reports, the police have not responded to the requests of the Romani residents to protect them from alleged intimidation and harassment. Nor have the police acted to prevent or investigate the permissibility of Szebb Jövőért Polgárőr Egyesület’s activities in the area. On 16 March, the Szebb Jövőért Polgárőr Egyesület indicated that, having successfully established their presence in Gyöngyöspata, they will also set up chapters in other towns to expand their patrols.

Szebb Jövőért Polgárőr Egyesület is effectively a vigilante group, listing its aims as preventing crime, protecting citizens and safeguarding public safety.¹ It has strong links with the Magyar Nemzeti Gárda (a newer group, with the same aims and leadership as the banned Magyar Gárda). The current patrols have been verbally supported by Gábor Vona, head of Jobbik and founder of the banned Magyar Gárda. The presence of such groups, with their anti-Romani rhetoric and vigilante activities, increases inter-ethnic tension and risks provoking violence. According to the ERRC’s monitoring, there were at least 48 attacks against Roma in Hungary between 2008 and 2010, which resulted in at least 9 deaths.² The alleged harassment and intimidation of Romani citizens by anti-Roma vigilante groups present in Roma neighbourhoods adds to growing inter-ethnic tensions and fuels a climate of violence which exacerbates the marginalisation of Roma.

According to both international and domestic legal frameworks, Hungary is obliged to protect the life, personal integrity and private life all of its citizens: the Hungarian Constitution guarantees the right to liberty and personal security. As a party to the European Convention on Human Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Hungary is bound to ensure that all citizens can exercise their rights to liberty, security of the person and private and family life.

The undersigned organisations join Hungarian Romani and non-Romani organisations in urging your offices to fulfil your obligations under domestic and international law in Gyöngyöspata and to intervene to ensure that the situation does not escalate into physical violence. We call for the police to intervene to protect the Roma from intimidation and harassment and to stop any illegal activities carried out by Szebb Jövőért Polgárőr Egyesület or other related groups.

Sincerely,

Robert Kushen
Executive Director
European Roma Rights Centre

Nicola Duckworth
Director for Europe and Central Asia
Amnesty International

Paul LeGendre
Director, Fighting Discrimination Program
Human Rights First

¹ Szebb Jövőért Polgárőr Egyesület, available at: <http://www.szebbjovo-ert.com/index.php?q=content/Alapszabaly>

² ERRC, Attacks Against Roma in Hungary: January 2008-July 2010, available at: <http://www.errc.org/cms/upload/file/attacks-list-in-hungary.pdf>

TO: Prime Minister, Viktor Orbán
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Parliamentary Commissioner for National and Ethnic Minorities, Ernő Kállai

CC: European Commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship, Viviane Reding
European Commissioner for Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion, László Andor
Head of the Roma Taskforce and European Commission Director-General for Justice, Françoise Le Bail
President of the European Parliament, Jerzy Buzek
MEP, Lívia Járóka
MEP, Kinga Gönöz
MEP, Renate Weber
Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, Thomas Hammarberg
Council of Europe Secretary General, Thorbjørn Jagland
Special representative for Roma Issues to the Secretary General of the Council of Europe, Jeroen Schokkenbroek
OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, Knut Vollebaek
OSCE/ODIHR Senior Advisor on Roma and Sinti Issues, Andrzej Mirga
European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights Director, Morten Kjærum
European Commission against Racism and Intolerance Chair, Nils Muiznieks