

20 April 2010

Macedonian Ministry of Interior
Minister of Interior Gordana Jankulovska

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Honourable Minister Jankulovska,

The European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) is writing to express deep concern about the violent clash between special force police officers and Roma in the market in Suto Orizari, Skopje, Macedonia, on 15 April 2010; the scale of the police response appears to have been disproportionate to the situation, enflaming tensions and leading to violence.

According to national media and reports from ERRC partners in Macedonia, the violence was sparked by an action of the State Inspectorate of Commerce during which 20,000 EUR of merchandise was confiscated from Romani vendors in the market. About 200 Special Forces police officers were called, arriving in about 40 police transporters and equipped in riot gear. The overwhelming police presence further heightened the tense situation, which resulted in clashes between the police and civilians. Rocks were thrown and the police used tear gas to disperse the crowd. Although the media has only reported the number of police injured, the Mayor of Suto Orizari, Elvis Bajram, indicated that about 40 Romani individuals were injured, among them minors.

Several aspects of this incident raise concern:

- No warning was communicated to the municipality in advance to allow them to prepare, so the situation was able to get out of hand quickly;
- The severe police response appears to have elevated an already tense situation into a violent confrontation; the scale of police presence during this incident appears to be excessive;
- A large number of Roma were reportedly injured during the incident; and
- The market in Suto Orizari has operated for over a decade, selling goods which are imported through official customs checks at the Macedonian borders. Similar merchandise is widely available in many markets in Macedonia, including the largest market, Bit Pazar, but no state action against this or any other location has been reported, certainly not police action on this scale.

The Macedonian government has publicly committed, within the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion and in its National Strategy for Roma to work towards equal treatment of Roma and to close the gap between Roma and non-Roma in Macedonia. Further, as a party to the European Convention on Human Rights, Macedonia is bound to ensure that all citizens are protected from torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Within the framework of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Macedonian authorities are obliged to act in the best interests of children and to ensure that no child is subject to torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Minister Jankulovska, the ERRC calls on your office to ensure a full investigation into the violent clash which took place between police officers and Romani street vendors, including minors, on 15 April 2010 and bring to justice all officers found to have acted disproportionately with violence in contravention of the law.

Sincerely,

Robert Kushen
Managing Director