

25 May 2011

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Dear Mr President,

With reference to our communication of 8 February concerning the removal of water from the Romani settlement living behind the ruins of a medieval castle in Vidigueira,¹ the European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) notes that on its last visit on 12 May 2011 the water source that was destroyed on 3 February 2011 has since been restored. The ERRC welcomes the restoration of essential water supplies to the approximately 67 Roma who live in the settlement.

The ERRC, however, notes that the circumstances of the return of water are unknown to the residents of the settlement, nor are any financial or other conditions attached to such. We remain gravely concerned regarding the deplorable living conditions under which the Roma live; in makeshift corrugated metal shacks without sanitation, electricity, waste removal and drainage.

The ERRC furthermore expresses concern regarding the unwillingness of the Vidigueira municipality to communicate on the water issue in particular and the situation of the Romani community in Vidigueira in general. The ERRC has made numerous attempts by both email and phone to reach you or other responsible officials at the municipality of Vidigueira, requesting an appointment to ascertain the sequence of events leading up to the destruction of the water source on 3 February 2011 and the subsequent reinstallation of the water supply and future plans for the provision of water. We have received no substantive response.

On 12 May 2011, three ERRC researchers managed to schedule an appointment with a municipal official supposedly willing to answer questions. During the meeting, however, the municipal official was in fact not able to provide much useful information or answers to questions put by ERRC researchers. Indeed, ERRC researchers were asked to leave the premises.

The ERRC therefore respectfully requests the municipality of Vidigueira to answer, in writing, the following questions:

- Is the municipality the water provider in the Romani settlement and did the Romani families have duly signed contracts with the municipality/ other water provider? Water and sanitation bills obtained by Romani residents indicate that the municipality is the water provider.
- Was there a formal decision by the municipality to destroy the water source in the Romani community on 3 February 2011?

¹ Available in English and Portuguese at: <http://www.errc.org/cikk.php?cikk=3812>.

- Were residents duly notified? If so, in what way were they notified and how many times?
- Please provide copies of decisions and notification/s in your reply.

- As the Romani families receive individual water bills from the municipality, how is individual water consumption calculated when it comes from a communal water source?
- Please explain the reasons for charging Romani residents for sanitation and drainage when clearly none of the aforementioned services exist in the settlement (please find enclosed copy of a bill pertaining to water, sanitation and drainage issued by the municipality of Vidigueira to a Romani resident)
- When was the water reinstalled in the Romani community and under what conditions is water provided?
 - Have Romani residents signed contracts outlining conditions for the most recent water provision?

In addition, the ERRC notes that the appalling living conditions and water issues in the Romani settlement behind the castle ruins in Vidigueira form part of a Collective Complaint with the European Social Rights Committee under the Revised European Social Charter lodged by ERRC against Portugal in 2010.²

The ERRC looks forward to receiving responses to questions set out in this letter at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

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Executive Director

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² ERRC v Portugal, Collective Complaint 61/2010. Available at:
http://www.coe.int/t/dghl/monitoring/socialcharter/Complaints/Complaints_en.asp