

Forced Evictions of Roma Communities in Greece in Relation to the Preparation of the Olympic Games

**Notes presented by COHRE to the UN Committee on
Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**

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1. Forced Evictions of Roma Communities and the Olympic Games: A Twofold Relationship

Forced evictions of Roma communities are occurring on a large scale throughout Greece and have been consistently and comprehensively reported by local organisations, including the Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM). These highlight a pattern of severe discrimination against Roma communities throughout the country, notably in the housing sector.¹ Very often, local authorities are the ones carrying out the forced evictions, which often involve police brutality.

Overall, the majority of forced evictions affecting Roma communities in Greece fail short to provide adequate compensation, reparation and resettlement to the victims. In those rare cases where a resettlement plan is foreseen, the authorities often fail short to implement such measures.

In any case and regardless of the implementation side, when authorities commit themselves to resettlement and compensations, these measures only cover Greek Roma. As such, non-Greek Roma who have legal residency status, such as Albanian-Roma, are systematically excluded from these measures.

In this context, the holding of the Olympic Games in Greece from August 13 to August 29 2004 is bearing serious implications on the Roma's enjoyment of housing rights. According to reports from national organisations, the preparation of the Olympic Games has led to further forced evictions or threats of forced evictions for the Roma communities living in the Greater Athens area, as well as in Crete.

In that respect, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights highlighted, in its General Comment No. 7, that instances of forced evictions " might be carried out (...) in the holding of major sporting events, including the Olympic Games."

The relationship between the preparation of the Olympic Games and forced evictions of Roma communities in Greece is twofold. In the first scenario, municipal authorities have been using and invoking the preparation of the Olympic Games as a pretext to carry out forced evictions of Roma communities. The Municipalities of Halandri, Aghia Paraskevi, Aspropyrgos and Aharnai/Menidi, located in or near the Greater Athens area, have all resorted to such argument to threaten Roma settlements with forced eviction or to actually carry out forced evictions. According to the Greek National Commission for Human Rights 'it is also a fact that the holding of the Olympic Games has been an occasion for driving the Roma out of many regions. Local communities (very often untruthfully) invoked the need for the construction of sports facilities in order to get rid of the Roma, as was the case in Mexico in 1968.'²

¹ For further information, see Comments of the European Roma Rights Center (ERRC) and the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) on the occasion of the Article 16 Review of Greece, Hungary and Turkey under the European Social Charter supervision cycle XVII-1, December 2003, available at http://www.errc.org/publications/legal/COHRE-Greece-Hungary-Turkey_2003.doc

² See the report of the Greek National Commission for Human Rights, available at http://www.nchr.gr/category.php?category_id=99

As the Olympic Games approach, local NGOs, including the Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM), fear that Municipalities and/or the State will take drastic measures and start demolishing Roma's settlement without providing compensation or resettlement to the affected communities. According to reports, visible Roma settlements, such as the Halandri one -located next to a Metro station under construction- bear the risk of being forcibly evicted in the run up to the Olympics for beautification purposes.

In the second scenario, the actual construction of infrastructure for the Olympic Games has lead to the forced eviction of the Roma community of Marousi, located in the Greater Athens area and adjacent to the main Olympic complex. While, so far, no other Roma settlement has been directly affected by the actual construction of infrastructure related to the Olympic Games, municipal authorities, such as the Municipality of Nea Alikarnassos in Crete, have openly claimed that they wanted the land on which the Roma are -or can be settled- to build sports facilities or other infrastructure for the 2004 Athens Olympic Games.

2 Attempted and Actual Forced Evictions using the Olympic Games as a Pretext: the Roma Settlements in Aspropyrgos

The preparation of the Olympic Games has been used by Municipalities as a pretext to forcibly evict Roma settlements located in the Greater Athens.

The Roma settlement of Aspropyrgos, situated near Athens, has been one settlement where municipal authorities have been using the preparation of the Olympic Games as a pretext to forcibly evict Roma communities. Overall, from 1999 on, Roma communities of Aspropyrgos have been threatened with forced eviction either by police officers or by civilians threatening to call the police.

While it was not clear, until recently, whether Olympic facilities would be built in Aspropyrgos, the Mayor of the town used this perspective as an excuse to forcibly evict or refuse the relocation of the Roma communities. Ultimately, no Olympic facilities were constructed in the area.

For instance, on July 14 2000, a municipal bulldozer, allegedly accompanied by the Mayor and the police, demolished numerous Roma huts in a Roma settlement situated on a garbage dump in Aspropyrgos. The huts, which belonged to Greek and Albanian Roma, contained the inhabitants' personal belongings. All families in the settlement situated on the garbage dump were ordered to leave within three days. The Roma tent dwellers living in the upper part of the garbage dump were evicted some days before this incident, when the Mayor of Ano Liosia – a Municipality located near Aspropyrgos – offered to each Roma family 100'000 drachmas (US\$ 266) to leave the settlement. Following the Roma's departure, the municipality demolished their tents. All the Roma –the ones evicted on July 14 and the ones evicted a few days earlier- are now living in other settlements around Aspropyrgos.

Furthermore, in September 2001, the municipal authorities of Aspropyrgos, under the orders of the Mayor, proceeded to destroy 6 homes and damaged others under the pretext of carrying out a "cleaning operation". The operation of September 2001 took place in a settlement close to one destroyed in July 2000. The demolition of the sheds was stopped following the intervention of GHM and of the Greek Ombudsman's Office.

A report by the Greek Ombudsman, released on January 26th 2001, condemned the July 2000 operation and found that “in all likelihood, members of the Municipality of Aspropyrgos have committed criminal acts”. The report further recommended that a prompt and impartial investigation into the action of the Aspropyrgos Municipality be carried out in order to bring those responsible to justice. In his report, the Greek Ombudsman also recommended to the authorities to administratively sanction the Mayor of Aspropyrgos, George Liakos. To date, George Liakos remains in function. On the other hand, the Public Prosecutor indicted him for breach of duty. The legal procedures have been completed and the mayor will stand trial before the Three Members Misdemeanours Court on May 21, 2004.

3. The Roma Community of Marousi: Forced Evictions Related to the Construction of Olympic Infrastructure

The Roma community living in Marousi (a suburb of Athens) has been directly affected by the construction of Olympic facilities, their settlement being located in the neighbourhood of the Olympic Stadium.³ Following an agreement with the Marousi municipal authorities, entailing compensation and resettlement provisions, Roma had to vacate the land where they have been living for decades. However, from September 2002 on, the Marousi municipal authorities have failed short to implement the agreement, while Albanian-Roma with legal residency status have been purposely excluded from it.

In addition, while the agreement refers to 40 Greek Roma families, public documents of the Mayor and the Ministry of the Interior only refer to 35 families. No justification has been advanced for this discrepancy and in fact, it could be that 5 families of Roma have been left out of the agreement's implementations since August 2002.

On September 26 2003, the Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM) filed a criminal complaint report with the Misdemeanours Prosecutor Office of Athens regarding the non-implementation of the agreement. Two case files have been opened in relation to this case. The preliminary inquiry in one of them has been completed, while the inquiry related to the other case is still going on, although under Greek law both should have been completed within four months from the date when the cases were filed. If evidence of criminal responsibility were established, the Mayor and/or Ministry of Interior officials would be indicted.

3.1. The Roma Community of Marousi and the Olympic Staduim

In 2002, the Roma community of Marousi has been asked by the municipal authorities to vacate their settlement because the 2004 Olympic Games Committee decided to extend the Olympic installation into that area to construct a parking lot or road enlargement for the 2004 Olympic Games.

At that time, the Municipality of Marousi assured the Roma families that special measures would be taken for their resettlement. In fact, an agreement was signed on August 1, 2002 between the Marousi Mayor and a representative of the Roma association *Elpida*. It is noteworthy to note that this agreement covered only the Greek Roma but

³ A special website with the eviction story (see text below), and backgrounds on the Roma and on the Olympics, along with many pictures and clips has just become available at <http://www.panoramatos.com/>.

not the Albanian Roma. Such exclusion reflects Greece's general policy to use its various plans only for Greek Roma and not for immigrant Roma, even if they are legal residents.

Under the terms of this agreement, the 40 Greek Roma families would vacate the plots of land where they have been living for decades. In return, the agreement stipulated that they would receive a significant amount of money, as a rent subsidy every month.⁴ As such, the Roma had to find houses/apartments, the monthly subsidy from the Municipality helping them to pay the rent.

The agreement also stipulated that the Roma families would, in the future, be resettled in heavy duty prefabricated houses to be constructed by the Marousi Municipality. In the longer term, the agreement also underlined that this relocation would be temporary and that the Municipality would also work towards guaranteeing permanent resettlement to the 40 families. Furthermore, under the agreement, the municipal authorities agreed to provide special assistance to the Roma families in clothing and food, as well as to elaborate a special plan for the Roma's integration in the local society.

From September 2002 on, and on the basis of this agreement, Roma families started to leave their settlement. Some of them rented houses, while others preferred to go and stay in houses that relatives owned or rented. Although the Roma promptly kept their part of the agreement, the municipality soon defaulted on implementing its various obligations under the agreement. Up to date, the Municipality of Marousi reportedly failed to implement the agreement passed with the Roma association *Elpida*. In that respect, some Roma families have voiced their concerned that the agreement with the Municipality was merely a pretext to lure them to vacate the land where they have been living, as infrastructure related to the Olympic Games had to be constructed there.

3.2. The Municipality's failure to implement the agreement

According to reports, the municipality soon defaulted on the payment of subsidies. As a result, certain Roma families fell in arrears and were evicted by their landlords. As such, in September 2003, the two Roma families of Dimitris and Panayota Nikolaou and Petrou Mitrou and Dimitra Karagianni were evicted by their landlords because they could not pay the rent. Other families also faced severe economic hardship, as they did heavily relied on the subsidies to cover the rental costs.

On January 2004, the Municipality of Marousi claimed to have paid the Roma families the money it owed (money which in some cases concerned the subsidies of 6 months or more). According to the official responsible at the Marousi Municipality for the payments to the Roma, with whom a representative of the Greek Helsinki Monitor (GHM) spoke during the week April 19th 2004, all forty Roma families have been paid through December 2003.

Nevertheless, the Marousi Mayor, in his February 12, 2004 letter to the Greek Ombudsman's Office, mentions that only 14 Roma families have been paid all the money they were owed for all the months until January 2004. The letter also mentions that other 21 families had been paid until November 2003. The Ministry of the Interior, in an answer to a parliamentary question on January 29, 2004, reiterated this state of fact.

⁴ This amount depends upon the size of the family. For instance, a family with two children –that is four people– would receive 735 Euros, while a family with six children would get 1150 Euros.

In any case, both the Mayor's document and the Ministry's document refer to 35 families, whereas the agreement refers to 40 Roma families. No justification has been advanced for this discrepancy and, in fact, it could be that 5 families of Roma have not been paid at all since August 2002.

At the time of writing (mid-April 2004), the subsidies from January 2004 had not been paid by the Municipality, which is, again, in arrears of payment. In that respect, the Mayor informed the Roma families in March 2004 that he decided to cease paying them the monthly subsidies until they had filed applications for housing loans for Roma. The Mayor alleged that as soon as all of them had made the loans applications, he would resume payment of the monthly subsidies. Such move constitutes a clear breach of contract, as no such provision exists in the initial agreement.

In addition to the Municipality's failure to provide the subsidies, reports indicate that it also failed to take steps to implement the resettlement parts of the agreement (i.e. temporary resettlement into prefabricated houses and permanent one). Although the Roma families have reportedly asked several times the Mayor to tell them where the prefabricated houses will be located, the mayor has not yet answered.

Regarding the provision of special assistance to the Roma families in clothing and food, some families have complained that they have not received much in the way of foodstuffs/clothing,

4 Conclusions and Recommendations

These two cases reflect a widespread practice of illegal forced evictions of "undesirable" Roma in Greece. Most of the time, local municipal authorities are the ones carrying out the forced evictions and failing to implement, when such measures are in place, resettlement and compensation plans. In that respect, the Marousi case shows that even when resettlement plans are developed, these are often simply not implemented. Furthermore, in cases where compensation and resettlement are provided, these often exclude non-Greek Roma, who have legal residency status in Greece. Criminal or administrative responsibility in relation to these forced evictions remains, most of the time, never established. Such practice, in turn, tends to encourage further forced evictions of Roma communities.

There is, today, a sense of urgency regarding forced evictions affecting Roma communities in Greece. Urgency as the run up to the Olympic Games might well imply further evictions of "visible" Roma settlements located in the greater Athens area for beautification purposes. The Roma settlement of Halandri is one of them. As such, COHRE believes that the Committee should raise this issue in its constructive dialogue with Greece, as well as in its concluding observations, making clear that the run up to the Olympics should not lead to further forced evictions of Roma communities for beautification or other purposes.

Local NGOs have also expressed their concern that once the Olympic Games have taken place, no more attention will be paid to the situation of the Roma from Marousi. As such, they fear that the agreement passed with the Municipality will remain a dead letter. In that respect, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) has remained silent on that particular issue, despite repeated calls from local and international NGOs,

including COHRE. Again, COHRE believes that this issue should be addressed in the dialogue with the Greek authorities, and reflected in the Committee's concluding observations. In that respect, the Committee could invite the IOC to attend its session on Greece and do so, in future, with countries hosting future Olympic Games.

Furthermore, there is an urgent need to guarantee that local authorities in Greece abide by international human rights law and standards related to the enjoyment of housing rights. In cases where local authorities fail to do so, administrative or criminal sanctions should be applied in a consistent manner. As long as such measures are not taken and implemented, COHRE fears that municipal authorities will have no incentive to change their attitude and abide by international human rights standards. The exclusion of Non-Greek Roma from resettlement and compensation plans in cases of forced evictions also needs to be addressed by the Committee in its dialogue with the Greek government, as well as in its concluding observations, in order to put a stop to this practice. Finally, adequate compensation and restitution should be provided to all victims of forced evictions.