

France: Three die in fire at Roma squat

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16 May 2013

Three Roma, two women and a 12-year-old child, died on Tuesday in a fire at an abandoned factory in Lyon in central France. Some 300 Roma were squatting in the building's offices. According to reports, there may be three or four more casualties. The survivors were transported to a local gymnasium.

The deaths are the direct result of the Socialist Party government's policy of hounding Roma from their encampments, energetically and brutally pursued by Minister of the Interior Manuel Valls aided by Justice Minister Christine Taubira.

The press cited some of the Roma from the site that a candle they were using may have been the cause of the blaze. Laurent el-Ghozi, founder of the Roma support group Romeurope does not exclude the possibility of a criminal act, stating, "There's no reason why it shouldn't happen again." He blamed the government for the deaths, saying, "This is the twelfth fire in a Roma dwelling this year, caused by the government's stupid policy of endless evictions."

Among the Roma group are several children and pregnant women. This did not prevent the authorities from cutting off the electricity, apparently requiring the squatters to use candles. They were forced to live in squalor as water was also cut off and no garbage collection was done. The Rhône region state representative's office (préfecture) was fully aware of the danger the Roma were in. Two months earlier a man had died as a result of a fall of masonry from the building.

They had occupied the offices only after being evicted from their previous squat in the Vaise neighbourhood. Anti-racist activist Jean Philippe accused the Rhône region préfecture of inhumane practices: "It refuses to apply a circular which rules that medical, social and security diagnoses should be made, its only response is evictions from squats and camps and every time the situation gets worse."

The law requires that authorities find adequate alternative accommodations in the case of evictions. This is routinely ignored, without sanctions from the Ministry of the Interior.

At the scene of the tragedy, Valls hypocritically expressed a "feeling of profound sadness," but was unrepentant over his persecution of the Roma. "These squats, like improvised camps, must be dispersed whenever they are present, here and elsewhere, a real danger," he declared.

Taubira, knowing full well that the group had been forced to seek refuge in the factory offices because of previous evictions without alternative housing, chimed in, calling for "a solution which is both honourable and effective."

A phony integration programme known as Andatu, which houses and legalises selected Roma, is used to avoid accusations of failing to apply the law that makes the préfecture responsible for finding housing for the homeless. Jean Philippe commented, "Nobody knows what the conditions for selection are. Also, it is used to avoid applying the law."

The intensification of the persecution of Roma, was initiated in France by former conservative president Nicolas Sarkozy. His infamous Grenoble speech of June 30, 2010 characterised Roma as "foreigners living in suspiciously irregular circumstances." He asked the interior minister "to put an end to unauthorized gypsy settlements. These are lawless zones not to be tolerated in France."

At the time, EU commissioner for Justice, Fundamental Rights and Citizenship Viviane Reding accused the Sarkozy government of "discrimination on the basis of ethnic origin or race." She described the French policy as a "disgrace." She implicitly compared the actions of the French government with those of the fascists during the Second World War. Afterward, she backed down and Sarkozy was able to continue with

this “disgrace,” as has Hollande’s government.

Hollande made it clear during his election campaign that he would continue Sarkozy’s persecution of the Roma. In a February 12 interview on Canal Plus TV, he proposed as a “solution” to the presence in France of Roma European Union (EU) citizens, “the creation of camps ... to accommodate them ... avoid these people settling just anywhere ... [to] enable these people to go back to Romania ... and not then return to France.” The Roma would be rounded up, and after their improvised encampments were broken up, they would be sent back to Romania. He wanted the establishment of “European rules” for this “disgrace.” Indeed, the persecution of Roma is a growing Europe-wide phenomenon.

A conflict broke out on March 15 when Valls declared “More than ever, the dismantling of camps are necessary and will continue.” He vilified the Roma, saying “the occupants of camps don’t want to be integrated into our country for cultural reasons or because they are controlled by gangs engaged in begging and prostitution. The Voix de Roms (Voice of the Roma) association has threatened to file charges for racial discrimination.

Such blatant racism has encouraged the development of vigilante groups acting with impunity against Roma camps. In Marseille on September 27 last year, under the eyes of the police and with the support of PS councils, themselves initiators of evictions and bulldozing throughout the country, violence was wrought on Roma encampments.



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