

ENGLISH GYPSY WOMEN WARN OF POSSIBLE “DEATHS” FROM FORCIBLE
EVICTIONS, AND APPEAL FOR INTERNATIONAL MEDIATION

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- 3,500 Gypsy and Traveler families on the road, 500 families to be evicted in May

Washington D.C., April 8 2005: A leading Gypsy advocacy group in England has warned that the “policy” of forcibly evicting Gypsy-Traveler families from their homes could result in deaths if it is not halted, and appealed to the United Nations and Council of Europe to intervene.

The appeal has been sent by the UK Association of Gypsy Women to Louise Arbour, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, and Alvaro Gil-Robles, the European Human Rights Commissioner, on the occasion of International Roma Day (April 8).

Catherine Beard, Chairwoman of the Gypsy Association, said that the appeal will be publicized tomorrow (Saturday) at a protest in London following a memorial service for Gypsies who died in the Holocaust.

The appeal comes at a time when 3,500 Gypsy-Traveler families are on the move in Britain, and another 500 Traveler families are facing eviction from the Dale Farm site in Sussex. Even though the Travelers own the land, they are considered illegal occupants because they have not received planning permission from the local council.

Ms. Beard and her colleagues are concerned that Dale Farm could be the scene of serious violence. In one recent eviction, reported by the Advocacy Project, a sick and elderly woman was among a group of Travelers evicted from the Twin Oaks caravan park in Herefordshire. The woman’s mobile home was demolished and her two wheelchairs destroyed.

The April 8 appeal warns that such evictions are particularly damaging to women: “We are convinced that they will soon result in serious injuries and even deaths.”

As well as being the Chairwoman of the UK Association, Ms. Beard is also Campaign Coordinator for the International Roma Women’s Network (IRWN), a group of 18 Roma women activists from East and West Europe, which receives support from the Advocacy Project. Ms. Beard warned a meeting in Vienna last week that if such a crisis can occur in Britain – which prides itself on respecting human rights – it can happen anywhere. Recent months have seen a wave of evictions against Roma throughout Europe.

The Vienna meeting, which was organized by the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia (EUMC), underscored the link between evictions and poor health. According to a recent report by consultant Anna Pomykala, poor living conditions help to explain why Roma throughout Europe suffer from chronic illness. The life expectancy for Traveler women in

Ireland is around eleven years lower than the national average.

Irish policies are partly responsible for the current crisis in England. The Irish government has made trespassing a criminal offense in an attempt to discourage traveling. This has led Travelers to move to England where they have provoked anger for buying land and setting up mobile homes without planning permission.

Gypsy-Traveler advocates reply that the real problem is a shortage of legal sites, which is forcing families to move onto illegal land and also live together in larger groups for protection. An estimated 90% of the Gypsy-Traveler requests for planning permission are turned down, at which point they are liable for eviction. Once on the road, they are prevented by the Criminal Justice Act from moving in groups of more than six vehicles. If they stop to rest, they are liable for arrest under the Anti-Social Behavior Act.

To Ms. Beard, this has all the hallmarks of a deliberate campaign to target Gypsy-Travelers and ultimately to destroy their culture.

The British government has ordered councils to identify land for caravan sites, but the National Association feels that this is now in jeopardy following a decision by the Conservative party to make gypsies an issue in the current General Election, and by a virulent campaign in the popular British press. The Sun tabloid has called for Gypsies to be “stamped on,” while the Daily Mail has set up a hotline to report complaints against Gypsy-Travelers. “Of course people are terrified of us,” said Mrs. Beard.

The fact that the Association has appealed to the United Nations is noteworthy because the UN has been largely indifferent to the plight of the Roma – in contrast to the zeal with which it has championed the rights of indigenous peoples.

In its appeal, the UK Association pledges to solicit the help of international civil society and exploit its international contacts through IRWN and other Roma bodies. It will also lobby the European parliament.

- For more information about the Association, contact [Catherine Beard and Rachel Francis](#).
- Visit the [EUMC](#) website.
- Read the report on the [health of Roma women in Europe](#) by consultant Anna Pomykala (“Breaking the Barriers – Romani Women and Access to Public Health Care”).