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Integration of Roma in towns and cities remains one of Europe's biggest challenges

Statement of Secretary General Thorbjørn Jagland for International Roma Day, 8 April

Strasbourg, 07.04.2014 - International Roma Day should remind us of the Roma people's rich contribution to European culture. Composers such as Liszt, Brahms and Verdi were influenced by Roma music and the Flamenco is inspired by Roma dance. Popular performers, including Charlie Chaplin and Yul Brynner, claim Roma origins. And similar to the famous Santiago de Compostela cultural route, there is also a European route of Roma culture, linking Slovenia, Romania, Greece, Germany and the UK, which underlines how Roma people are an integral part of European heritage.

However, the sad reality is that most of Europe's ten million Roma still live in segregation and dire poverty. Despite European programmes to help integrate the Roma in society, progress has been slow. The Roma people face discrimination in the media, in politics and in the jobs market on a daily basis.

This is most apparent in towns and cities across Europe. Too many Roma people still live in ghettos, and too many of their children attend segregated schools. Municipal services for housing, education and healthcare are often stretched to the limit, but also need to accommodate the Roma. Resistance and prejudice against Roma from parts of the population add to the difficulties. Mayors and local councils in cities like Duisburg, Germany and Strasbourg, France, deserve praise for resisting populist sentiment as they work hard to find humane solutions.

International organisations including the Council of Europe, the European Commission and the Open Society Foundation agree that the focus of assistance must now be at the local level. This was also one of the main conclusions of the Third EU Roma Summit in Brussels on 4 April.

With support from the European Union, the Council of Europe's ROMED programme has already helped train 1300 mediators in over 20 countries who advise Roma people on how to access education, health care and local government services. In 2013 the Council of Europe's Congress of local and regional authorities set up the European Alliance of Cities and Regions for Roma inclusion. The Alliance currently includes 122 participating towns and regions from 27 countries committed to share experiences and best practice. In addition, the Council of Europe and the EU launched the ROMACT programme involving 40 pilot municipalities in 5 countries: Bulgaria, Hungary, Italy, Romania and Slovakia. One of the main aims is to improve the capacity of local authorities to develop inclusive policies and make the best use of European funds.

There is certainly no quick fix. It will take years to end discrimination against Roma people. But assistance at the local level offers the most promising strategy to bring justice to Europe's largest minority. Those who help protect Roma rights in Europe's towns and cities deserve our attention and recognition.

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