



## **United States Mission to the OSCE**

### **ROMA AND SINTI**

**Statement of Ms. Erika Schlager  
U.S. Delegation to the OSCE Implementation Meeting  
October 8, 2003**

Mr. Moderator, the Supplementary Human Dimension Meeting on Roma issues was the first of our supplementary meetings this year. It was well organized, well attended, and provided considerable food for thought.

While the principal focus of that meeting was the draft Action Plan, those who were present at the meeting will recall two other issues that loomed large during the discussions.

First, there was considerable discussion of the reports that some Romani women in Slovakia were sterilized without the proper informed consent required by law – an issue raised in subsequent UN and Council of Europe meetings. The United States remains deeply troubled by these reports. We appreciate the Slovak Government's proposed legal changes that are intended to ensure that such practices do not occur. At the same time, we are concerned that the government's investigation fails to demonstrate the kind of high-level commitment necessary to generate public confidence in whatever final conclusions the investigation may produce.

The situation of Roma in and from Kosovo also sparked intense discussions – as it has at other recent human dimension meetings. This is not surprising: Kosovo once had a Romani population estimated very roughly at 130,000. Today, as a result of the Balkan wars, which forced the displacement of approximately 4 million people throughout the region, only some 30,000 remain in Kosovo, while an estimated 100,000 Kosovo Roma are either internally displaced, seeking asylum, or living in a legal gray zone. Approximately 8300 ethnic minorities have returned to Kosovo, to date including at least 2000 Roma/Ashkalia/Egyptians (RAE). As is the case for most refugees and IDPs, many displaced Kosovo Roma have been granted temporary status. Thus, the future remains uncertain for the many who have not returned. Ensuring that people enjoy the right to return home has been an important priority of the U.S. Government, and we have worked hard to protect the rights of minorities in Kosovo and throughout the region. While there has been progress, there is still much work to be done. The international community, including the OSCE participating States, must continue to expand its efforts to make Kosovo safe for Roma and other minorities.

With respect to the Action Plan currently under negotiation, the United States starts from the mantra of the High Commissioner on National Minorities: "There should be no doubt that primary responsibility to respect and ensure the rights of Roma falls to the governments of OSCE participating States." For example, it is up to the individual OSCE participating States to adopt and implement anti-discrimination legislation, and it is national public and political leaders who can most effectively condemn manifestations of racism and ensure that acts of violence and discrimination are appropriately investigated and prosecuted.

That said, there is an important role for the OSCE in assisting the participating States to fulfill both their commitments and aspirations in this field. This has already been demonstrated by the constructive and timely engagement of the ODIHR's Contact Point for Roma and Sinti Issues in a number of acute situations, some of which were marked by a pronounced escalation of tension.

There are two other areas, in particular, in which the United States believes the OSCE could play a useful role. First, for diverse and complex reasons, there are many countries where Romani individuals or communities may lack proper legal status. The consequences of this can be enormous, with implications for access to housing, education, social services, health care and even civic rights. We believe the OSCE can facilitate efforts by participating States to address this problem. Second, the OSCE is uniquely equipped to assist with voter education and get-out-the-vote campaigns in Romani communities.

Finally, with a view to the upcoming Chairmanship of Bulgaria – a country with a significant Romani minority – we urge the Bulgarian Government to lead by example. We are heartened by Bulgaria's adoption of a comprehensive anti-discrimination law, a step that we hope other governments will emulate. We hope the Bulgarian Government will intensify efforts to investigate and prosecute racially motivated acts of violence against Roma; increase efforts to foster Romani political participation; develop the successful de-segregation initiatives begun by Romani non-governmental organizations; and consider ways to address the legal status of Romani communities or "mahalas."