

## Roma repression – Europe’s great shame

*Speech by Anne Ramberg, Secretary General of the Swedish Bar Association, at the Stockholm Human Rights Award Ceremony 2012.*

It is a great joy and privilege to welcome you all here to the Stockholm Human Rights Award Ceremony 2012. The Award was established in 2009 by an initiative of the International Bar Association (IBA), the International Legal Assistance Consortium (ILAC) and the Swedish Bar Association. The initiative lies in line with one of the principal goals for the three organizations, namely to support the rule of law and the advancement of human rights. The prize is bestowed upon an individual or an institution for outstanding contributions to the rule of law and the promotion and protection of human rights. The Award has previously been given to Justice Richard Goldstone, to the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights, Navi Pillay, and last year to Aryeh Neier and George Soros of the Open Society. They have all carried out unique and altruistic work advancing democratic values, the rule of law and human rights.

I am very proud and extremely honoured to have the privilege of presenting the Stockholm Human Rights Award 2012 to two very worthy recipients. They are Thomas Hammarberg and the European Roma Rights Centre. They are given the award for their long-lasting, hard and diligent work in promoting the situation for the Roma population in Europe.

This year the Award is given in the honour of Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat born 100 years ago. As all of you know, Raoul Wallenberg saved tens of thousands of Jews in the second half of 1944. He prevented them from being sent to the Nazi concentration camps by issuing Swedish passports permitting them to leave Hungary. Raoul Wallenberg’s brave achievements are the proof that “One man can make a difference”. He showed us the importance of brave and decisive action when universal human rights are at risk.

As is well known, in spite of Raoul Wallenberg's efforts more than six million Jews and some 500 000 Roma were exterminated. Whilst it is always difficult to make meaningful comparison of suffering, it is a sad fact that the post-war attention to the fate of the Roma victims has not been as focused and wide-spread it should have been. And not only have the Roma victims been shrouded by oblivion. In addition, their sufferings and persecution has been permitted to continue to this very day. The Roma population in large measure remains the outcast of Europe.

The current situation in Europe, characterized by widespread xenophobia and "anti-Gypsyism", is deplorably similar to the situation at the time before the Second World War. As was the case in the 1930s, we are today facing a very strained economy, followed by cold anti-democratic winds. Anti-democratic and xenophobic politicians gain popular support in many countries as they so often do in times of economic distress and large-scale unemployment. Dark political forces thrive on this. In our country several common thugs and political oddballs have gained seats in political decision-making bodies both at national and local level. These forces may even be found in the Swedish courts as lay judges. And the same trend applies to several European countries.

The development just described is very alarming indeed. It is deeply concerning to note the inflammatory and openly discriminatory rhetoric advocating discrimination of foreigners that has characterized the European political discourse lately. The recent demands from certain European countries, including Sweden, to reintroduce visa requirements within the EU in an obvious attempt to curtail the freedom of movement of certain groups of people is deeply worrying. In 1926 legislation was introduced in Germany to discriminate against "gypsies, travellers and people considered shy of work". An element of these laws was the restrictions on the right of free movement of groups of people considered to be undesirable. If they did not have

any work they were sent to so-called House of corrections, *tukthus* in Swedish. In real terms they were sent to prison.

Against this sordid background it is all too obvious that politicians and legislators carry a huge responsibility to protect and defend those universal human rights that are embodied in the constitutions of most democratic countries. This struggle must be vigorously pursued at all times. The ugly faces of racism and general xenophobia must be fought against wherever they show up. In these times decent politicians of all democratic political convictions have a tall order in uniting against the dark forces in various shades of brown.

The European Roma population is the most exposed and discriminated ethnic minority in Europe of today. They are estimated to be some 10–12 million people. In some member states they make up some 10 per cent of the total population. They constitute the largest minority in Europe and reside in virtually all Council of Europe member states. Around 70 per cent of the European Roma population lives in Central and Eastern Europe; in Romania, Bulgaria, Spain and Hungary where the Roma population forms the largest ethnic minority, with between 400 000 and 600 000 people.

It is significant that the Roma population is the largest minority without a compact territory and unlike other national minorities, they do not receive any support from a kin-state. In some countries they are not even recognized as a minority, in spite of the fact that they have lived there for several centuries.

As is well known, the Roma minority has been suffering profound discrimination for centuries and, even today, is still frequently rejected by the rest of the population in countries where they live. Roma people are often attacked almost everywhere where they live, even in countries that like to call themselves “champions of democracy” with high profile rule of law agendas. As a result, the Roma people are segregated, discriminated against, uneducated, often living

on the margins of society. The efforts undertaken to improve their situation have so far produced very meagre results. The situation faced by Roma in terms of access to education, employment, health services and housing or in terms of social integration is still very often deplorable, not to say disgraceful. In large measure they continue to live in social misery. This is a vicious circle that has to be broken. To do so, we need brave people with integrity. In that context, I would like to quote the former UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, who in referring to Raoul Wallenberg said this:

*“His intervention gave hope to victims, encouraged them to fight and resist, to hang on and bear witness. It aroused our collective consciousness. Remembering his life should be an inspiration to others to act; for our future generations to act; for all of us to act.”*

Against this background, this year’s laureates, Mr Thomas Hammarberg and the European Roma Rights Centre, are particularly deserving. Let me briefly introduce them.

#### *Thomas Hammarberg*

Thomas Hammarberg has devoted almost his whole professional life to the promotion of human rights in Europe and in the world at large. From 2006 to 2012, he was the Council of Europe’s Commissioner for Human Rights, tirelessly promoting awareness of, and respect for, human rights in the 47 member States.

Before that, he held other very prominent positions. He was Secretary General of the Olof Palme International Center, Swedish ambassador for human rights, Secretary General of the Swedish NGO Save the Children and Secretary General of Amnesty International. He received the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of Amnesty International in 1977.

His work in the area of Human Rights has included several important tasks. Thomas Hammarberg has acted as Regional Adviser for Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus

to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. For several years, he was also the Swedish Prime Minister's Personal Representative in the UN Special Session on Children, as well as the Convener of the Aspen Institute Roundtables on "Human Rights in Peace Missions". Between 1996 and 2000, he was appointed special representative of the UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan, for human rights in Cambodia. He also participated in the work of the Refugee Working Group of the multilateral Middle East Peace Process. For the moment he is a counsellor to the UN on various issues.

Thomas Hammarberg has, during his time as the Council of Europe's Commissioner of Human Rights, worked very diligently to improve the situation of the Roma population which he believes is "shamefully flawed". In a number of speeches and statements, Hammarberg actively seeks to improve living conditions for the largest minority in Europe and criticizes the alarming levels of racism directed at these people. In his latest report on Italy, Thomas Hammarberg heavily criticizes the Italian authorities for their treatment of Sinti and Roma people. He also strongly criticized France's mass deportation of Roma in 2010. In a published letter to the German Chancellor Angela Merkel dating back to 2009, Hammarberg calls for a halt on deportations to Kosovo in particular.

He has warned that "today's rhetoric against the Roma is alarmingly similar to that used by the Nazis before the mass killings started".

For his resilience and passion in support of Roma rights Thomas Hammarberg has received several distinctions.

Can I please ask Thomas Hammarberg to come and receive the award.

### *The European Roma Rights Centre*

The European Roma Rights Centre (ERRC) is based in Budapest. It is an international public interest law organization working to combat anti-Romani racism and

human rights abuse of Roma by means of strategic litigation, research and policy development, advocacy and human rights education.

The organization has been given consultative status at the Council of Europe, as well as with the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations.

Since its establishment in 1996, the ERRC has endeavoured to provide Roma with the tools necessary to combat discrimination and achieve equal access to justice, education, housing, health care and public services.

The ERRC runs an extensive research programme providing reliable data about the human rights situation of Roma. It has successfully focused public attention and political priorities on the human rights situation of Roma in Europe.

It has contributed to the development of public interest law in the region, through litigation and legal training in the field of Roma rights. It has secured access to justice and redress for human rights violations for Roma across Europe.

The ERRC has also developed significant jurisprudence on discrimination in access to education and the state response to racially-motivated violence through a series of landmark cases. It has set in motion more than 500 court cases in 15 countries to bring to justice state and non-state actors, who have discriminated against Roma individuals or have committed violence against them. The organization has successfully promoted the cause of the Roma in several prominent cases in the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg.

It has secured over 2 million euros in compensation for Roma individuals for the abuse they have suffered and the subsequent failure of their respective governments to ensure justice. It has influenced the human rights aspects of EU enlargement, through monitoring of compliance with the "Copenhagen criteria" by EU candidate countries and ensuring that both EU Member States and candidate countries address the situation of Roma as a priority issue.

The ERRC has produced several significant policy documents on behalf of the European Commission and the Fundamental Rights Agency and last but not least it has become one of the leading advocates in implementing anti-discrimination and human rights law in Europe. The organization has been the recipient of numerous awards for its efforts and achievements to advance human rights respect of Roma.

May I ask the executive director of the European Roma Rights Centre, Mr Dezideriu Gergely, to come forward and receive the Stockholm Human Rights Award on behalf of the EERC.