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Czech Republic: The President's visit to Ostrava should send a strong signal against discrimination of Roma

The new President of the Czech Republic is visiting the city of Ostrava today. In Ostrava and the Czech Republic at large, Roma are experiencing widespread discrimination in access to adequate housing, education, healthcare and protection from violence and harassment.

In his inaugural speech the new President declared that far-right groups known for organizing anti-Roma marches are one of the three key problems of Czech Republic.

Amnesty International appreciates the President's recognition of the problem of racially-motivated violence and hopes that he will become a strong voice against systemic discrimination of Roma in Czech Republic.

In this regard, his visit to Ostrava is symbolically important.

Ostrava is the city which brought international attention to the Czech Republic after the 2007 judgment of the European Court of Human Rights held that Romani children were discriminated against in their access to education.

Ostrava was also harshly criticized for the forced eviction of over 40 Romani families from the Přednádraží neighbourhood on the outskirts of the city. All but 35 people who resisted the eviction were moved to unaffordable and unsuitable accommodation.

The President should use this opportunity to highlight the importance of civil society working against discrimination of Roma. This visit coincides with the relocation of *Vzájemné soužití* (Life Together), the largest NGO working with Roma in Ostrava, to its new offices. The NGO had to leave its premises in January 2013 after the municipality decided to terminate their lease. Its director, Kumar Vishwanathan believes that the decision was a form of punishment for the campaign of the NGO against the forced eviction of Romani residents from Přednádraží.

Life Together had been working out of this location in the centre of Ostrava, providing social services and advice with regard to housing, education, human rights, health and other issues to 850 clients annually, for over 14 years before their relocation. Many of its clients were Roma who were at risk of eviction from their homes or who had been evicted and rendered homeless.

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