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Roma

Profile

Kosovo Roma speak either Serbian or Romany as their first language. Most are Christian Orthodox, but some are Muslim. They are a dispersed group, with a significant number remaining displaced after the violence of 1999 and 2004, mainly in camps in Kosovo and Serbia. The European Roma Rights Centre has estimated the pre-1999 Roma population at 120,000.

Until the 1990s, Kosovo Roma were a very diverse group; they spoke Romany, Albanian or Serbo-Croat, and were Muslim or Orthodox Christians. In the 1990s, the groups that spoke Albanian began identifying themselves as distinct from the Roma, either as Ashkalia or Egyptians (see below).

The Roma, together with the Serbs, are the most discriminated against group in Kosovo. However, the Roma are in the worst position because they are excluded from all aspects of society and do not have any negotiating power, similarly to the other smaller communities, nor the backing of a kin state. Poverty amongst this group is widespread.

The Roma have one reserved seat in the Kosovo Assembly. They have been excluded from real participation in political life and are excluded from discussions on the future status of Kosovo.

Historical context

The Roma came to the Balkans in the 13th century. In Kosovo, they settled early, but were viewed as second-class citizens and faced rampant exclusion. During World War II they were persecuted and many were killed. Although they still faced discrimination, the Roma fared better during Tito's Yugoslavia than either before or after. In the early 1990s, when many Albanians were dismissed from their jobs, Roma took some of their positions. The Roma were used by the Serbian authorities to bury the dead during the 1999 war, and are seen by many Albanians as collaborators with Milosevic's regime. For this reason they faced attack by ethnic Albanian militants during and following the 1998-1999 war.

Current issues

Roma in Kosovo today are mired in poverty, lack physical security and freedom of movement, and have no possibility to return to their pre-war homes. In their makeshift settlements, they lack access to education and public services, including health care, justice, and employment.

Many Roma remain encamped in Serb-controlled northern Kosovo, near the Trepca lead mine, where many, including children, have suffered from severe lead poisoning. Despite being aware of the public health emergency since 2000, UNMIK has been slow to relocate Roma from these camps despite alarming reports by the World Health Organization, other international institutions, and non-governmental organizations. In 2006 the European Court of Human Rights rejected an application filed

on behalf of camp inhabitants by the European Roma Rights Centre; because UNMIK is not a party to the European Convention on Human Rights, the court found it had no jurisdiction. Relocation of Roma from the polluted camps to new settlements in southern Mitrovica has proceeded slowly during 2006 and 2007.

Roma face widespread harassment for using their mother tongue, either Serbian or Romany, in majority Albanian areas. They have scant representation in Kosovo's governance, and have been excluded from talks on Kosovo's final status.

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