

DESPERATE PLIGHT OF ROMA HOLOCAUST SURVIVORS SET TO WORSEN WITHOUT FURTHER ASSISTANCE, WARNS IOM

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The plight of tens of thousands of Roma Holocaust survivors already living in abject poverty in eastern and central Europe will become even more desperate without basic humanitarian assistance, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) warns as it marks International Roma Day today.

An historically ostracised community without the same access to education, healthcare and employment as others, the Roma were heavily persecuted by the Nazis. Their caravans were often ambushed, occupants murdered and their wagons burnt. Many were deported to concentration camps where they perished. Those who survived are once again struggling for their lives. The fall of communism and the demise of a welfare system that once provided guaranteed work, home heating and medical care, has hit the Roma hardest at a time of resurgent discrimination, hostility and violence towards them. "Many Roma live in squalid settlements without any services and which don't appear on any map," says Delbert Field, IOM's Roma Issues focal point. "Even in countries which have now joined the European Union, the Roma are often living in destitution and lack access to education, healthcare and housing." Roma Holocaust survivors with state old-age pensions may receive, depending on where they live, between US\$ 10 and US\$ 120 a month. This money is often used to support as many as three generations living under the same roof as younger Roma increasingly travel to other countries in search of work, leaving grandparents to bring up grandchildren. For many other Holocaust victims, there is no pension or benefits, only uncertainty and despair as they near the end of their lives. Since 2002, IOM, together with local partners including many Roma NGOs, has helped more than 64,000 Roma victims of the Nazi Holocaust receive basic life sustaining assistance such as food, firewood, coal and hygiene articles. In addition, IOM has provided legal and medical assistance, contributing to a sustainable improvement of the sometimes-appalling living conditions of Roma Holocaust survivors. By August 2005, projects will have delivered about US\$ 30.8 million in direct aid to elderly Roma living in Belarus, the Czech Republic, Hungary, FYR Macedonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Poland,

Romania, the Russian Federation, Serbia and Montenegro, Slovakia and Ukraine. This humanitarian programme is believed to be the only one of its kind assisting Roma victims of the Holocaust and is part of a wider project helping disabled, homosexual and Jehovah's Witness Holocaust survivors. Funding is provided from monies designated from the proceeds of the Swiss Banks Settlement in the US District Court for the Eastern District of New York and from the German Foundation "Remembrance, Responsibility and Future". "For most of the Roma Holocaust survivors, this aid is the first formal recognition of their suffering in 60 years and comes at a time when, by their own account, life is at its worst since the Second World War," explains Field who is also coordinator of the programme. "People have told us that without this assistance they would have either frozen or starved to death." However, with funds almost depleted, the programme is due to be terminated by the autumn, leaving the elderly Roma in a precarious situation with winter approaching. IOM has estimated that there are about 145,000 Roma Holocaust survivors living in eastern and central Europe and in need of assistance. While younger Roma may benefit from improved living conditions and opportunities, elderly Roma can't wait. "If we can get additional funds from new donors, we could reach most of these people in desperate need of assistance," adds Field. "This year is the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II. It is only right that Roma Holocaust survivors receive some basic help to ease their final years."

Despre Organizatia Internationala pentru Migratie, Misiunea din Romania

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<http://www.iom.int/en/news/romaday.shtml> Marie-Agnes Heine, Public Information Officer IOM/German Forced Labour Compensation Programme, Tel: +41 22

5928220 Jean-Philippe Chauzy, Head of Media and Public Information, IOM Tel: 41 22 717 9361 Mobile: 41 79 285 4366 mheine@iom.int

ORGANIZATIA INTERNATIONALA PENTRU MIGRATIE, MISIUNEA DIN ROMANIA

<http://www.iom.int>