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## **Bulgaria / COVID-19 response: “Stop hate speech and racial discrimination against the Roma minority” – UN experts**

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GENEVA (13 May 2020) – Two UN human rights experts today called on the Government of Bulgaria to stop hate speech and racial discrimination against the Roma minority in its response to COVID-19, and halt police operations targeting Roma neighbourhoods during the pandemic.

“We are deeply concerned at the discriminatory limitations imposed on Roma on an ethnic basis that are overtly supported by Bulgarian State officials as part of the broader measures to prevent the spread of COVID-19,” said the UN Special Rapporteurs on racism, E. Tendayi Achiume, and on minority issues, Fernand de Varennes.

“The placement of checkpoints since mid-March at the entrance of the already segregated Roma areas in Nova Zagora, Kazanlak, Sliven, Yambol, and Sofia – allegedly implemented as part of efforts to curb the pandemic– is a violation of Roma’s right to equality and freedom of movement, and could further expose Roma residents to the virus, especially where access to sanitation is poor such as in the Nova Zagora neighbourhood” they said.

The experts also drew attention to the police operation codenamed ‘Respect’ that specifically targets Roma and allows police officers to patrol inside Roma neighborhoods to control whether Roma minority respect the restrictions related to COVID-19 in Burgas and Sofia (Faculteta).

“This operation must be brought to an end as it violates the principles of non-discrimination and equality, and adopts an overly-securitised approach that may put at risk the right to health of Roma people.”

“It is concerning that high-level officials from the Government and the Judiciary and a member of a political party have spoken in favor of a government response to COVID-19 that singles out Roma,” they said, noting with concern that a nationalist party leader described Roma quarters in the cities as potential ‘nests of infection’, which fuels hatred and violence against Roma.

“Such remarks contribute to exacerbating anti-Roma sentiments among the population and foster Roma social exclusion, segregation and marginalization,” they said. “The authorities should not exploit the pandemic to further exclude Roma and portray them as criminals and contagious.”

The human rights experts urged the Bulgarian Government to condemn hate speech, racist and nationalist populism swiftly and unequivocally. “Where nationalist populism threatens racial equality, Governments must take action to combat this threat at all levels, including national, provincial and local,” they stressed.

“Racial discrimination and racism within state institutions is a reality that Governments should not deny. The Bulgarian authorities must condemn this and any other conduct that targets Roma and other minorities on an ethnic or related basis,” the human rights experts concluded.

The two Special Rapporteurs have conveyed their concerns in writing to the Government of Bulgaria.

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**Ms. E. Tendayi ACHIUME** (Zambia) was appointed by the Human Rights Council as [Special Rapporteur on contemporary forms of racism](#), racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance in September 2017. Ms. Achume is a Professor of Law at the University of California, Los Angeles School of Law. She is also a research associate of the African Center for Migration and Society at the University of Witwatersrand in South Africa.

**Mr. Fernand DE VARENNES** (Canada) was appointed as [Special Rapporteur on minority issues](#) by the Human Rights Council in June 2017. Dr. de Varennes is Extraordinary Professor at the University of Pretoria in South Africa, Cheng Yu Tung Visiting Professor at the University of Hong Kong, and Adjunct Professor in Human Rights at the National University of Ireland, in Galway.

The Special Rapporteurs are part of what is known as the [Special Procedures](#) of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council's independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. Special Procedures' experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity.

UN Human Rights, country page: [Bulgaria](#)

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