

## CZECH REPUBLIC

### HUMAN RIGHTS DEVELOPMENTS

The treatment of the Czech Republic's ethnic Roma minority remained a major stumbling block as it made progress towards membership in the European Union. The government's decision in July to allow British authorities to screen passengers bound for Britain at Prague's airport drew criticism from human rights and civic groups, as well as Czech President Vaclav Havel and speaker of the Czech Parliament Vaclav Klaus, who charged that the checks discriminated against Roma. A journalists' strike at the Czech state-run television network in December 2000 focused attention on political interference in the public media and prompted calls for new legislation to ensure its independence. Policing during the September 2000 World Bank/International Money Fund meetings in Prague drew hundreds of complaints and several lawsuits alleging police ill-treatment, torture, and misconduct. While officials stated that they exercised great caution and rejected all suspicious arms transactions, irresponsible transfers of arms from the Czech Republic continued to be a source of concern in 2001.

De facto discrimination against ethnic Roma in the country remained the most disturbing human rights problem in 2001, affecting access to justice, education, housing, employment, and public services. Little progress was made in implementing the Czech government's long-term strategy to improve the situation of the Romani minority, adopted in June 2000. Racist attacks on Roma continued, but police and prosecutors frequently failed to adequately investigate and prosecute Roma complaints.

The July stabbing death of a thirty-year-old Romani man, Ota Absolon, by a skinhead—racist gang-member—in Svitany, eastern Bohemia, renewed public attention to the failure of state and local authorities to protect minorities victimized by racially motivated violence and abuse. In the Absolon case, the accused was a repeat offender, having received a suspended sentence in 1997 for seriously injuring a Romani man by stabbing him in the stomach. In another incident, forty-five skinheads reportedly attacked a group of twenty Romani men with baseball bats in the town of Novy Bor on April 24, leaving eight Roma injured. According to local Romani representatives, approximately ten Roma and ten skinheads were charged in connection with the incident. The arrested Roma men claimed that they were being punished unjustly for acting out of self-defense. They also criticized the police for failing to pursue Polish and German skinheads who participated in the attack.

The deployment of British immigration officials at Prague's Ruzyně Airport on July 18 drew sharp criticism from human rights groups as discriminatory against Roma. The Czech government agreed to the checks in order to stave off the reintroduction of visa requirements for Czech citizens traveling to the United Kingdom. The agreement was prompted by the wave of mostly-Roma Czech citizens seeking asylum in the U.K. following the introduction of visa-free travel in 1990.

Between January and September 2001, 1,200 asylum claims were filed in the United Kingdom by Czech Roma citizens, none of which were successful.

Before the checks were suspended in early August, British immigration officers had prevented 120 people—the majority of them Roma—from boarding flights to the United Kingdom. The checks were reinstated on August 27. To bring public attention to the selection process, two undercover reporters for Czech Television (CT), Richard Samko and Nora Novakova, attempted to board a U.K.-bound flight. When questioned by immigration officials, Samko, an ethnic Roma, gave answers identical to those offered by his colleague, a non-Roma Czech. Although both are in their twenties with full-time jobs, carried Czech passports and the same amount in cash, and possessed the numbers and names of people they would be visiting, Samko was denied entrance to the flight. Because most of the Czech citizens claiming asylum in the United Kingdom have been Roma, the Czech Helsinki Committee argued that the checks were designed to discriminate against this group in particular. Such discriminatory checks could deny Czech Roma their right to seek asylum in the United Kingdom.

On December 20, 2000, staff members at Czech Television, the country's public television network, barricaded themselves in the company's newsroom to protest the Czech Television Council's appointment of Jiri Hodac as the station's director. The television journalists accused Hodac of political bias because of his close ties to political leaders. The appointment sparked a widely-supported newscasters' strike, criticism from media organizations abroad, and a demonstration in Prague by some 100,000 people. Despite Hodac's resignation on January 11, journalists continued to call for changes in the law governing the selection of the council to ensure its political independence and public accountability. On January 23, the Czech Parliament passed a bill allowing nongovernmental organizations and civic groups to participate in the nomination of council members. Although a new council was appointed under the new system on May 25, CT employees remained critical of a provision that enabled a parliamentary committee to narrow the list of nominees before submitting it to lawmakers.

In the aftermath of the September 2000 IMF/World Bank summit in Prague (see *World Human Rights Watch World Report 2000*), the U.N. Committee against Torture, the U.N. Human Rights Committee, the European Union, and local and international nongovernmental organizations expressed concern over alleged police ill-treatment, the arbitrary detention of protesters, and violations of detainees' rights.

Despite numerous pledges to reject arms sales to human rights abusers, areas of armed conflict, and countries that might illegally divert weapons, the Czech Republic continued to supply weapons in all such cases. The Slovak submission to the U.N. arms register indicates that in 2000 (and also in 1999) Czech weapons were supplied via Slovakia to Angola, whose long-running civil war has been marked by gross abuses on both sides. The Czech Republic was a major supplier of weapons to war-torn Sri Lanka. Under a 1999 contract, the Czech Republic in 2000 delivered surplus tanks to Yemen despite concerns that they might be diverted, as had happened a year earlier with tanks from Poland, and initiated negotiations for further arms sales to Yemen. Such sales typically involved surplus Soviet-standard weapons, particularly undesirable following the Czech Republic's accession to NATO in 1999.

There were also allegations of Czech involvement in illegal arms transactions, including a case in April in which a Ukrainian plane carrying Czech weapons was halted at Bulgaria's Burgas airport on suspicion that the weapons were to be delivered to Eritrea, under a U.N. embargo at the time. Following an investigation, the cargo was released for delivery to Georgia, the authorized destination, although there appeared to be discrepancies regarding the weapons carried, which reportedly exceeded that authorized for sale. In June, the Czech Republic, a state party to the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty, reported that it had completed destruction of its stockpile of antipersonnel landmines. A month earlier, at an arms fair in Brno, a Czech company offered antipersonnel landmines for sale in violation of the treaty.

## **DEFENDING HUMAN RIGHTS**

Human rights groups worked freely with little government intervention. In July, following its campaign to bring greater scrutiny to new British immigration controls, the Czech Helsinki Committee was given permission to monitor the checks at Prague's airport. Civic Legal Observers, a nongovernmental organization based in Brno, filed twenty-six criminal complaints and four constitutional complaints against police officers for alleged abuses during the IMF/World Bank summit. La Strada continued to disseminate information on women's rights, provide social assistance and support to trafficked women, and influence legislation to ensure the protection of women's rights.

## **THE ROLE OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY**

### **United Nations**

In July, the U.N. Human Rights Committee concluded that the Czech Republic's antidiscrimination legislation was inadequate. The committee also noted the failure of police and judicial authorities to investigate, prosecute, and punish hate crimes and called on the government to take steps to combat racial violence and incitement and provide proper protection to Roma and other minorities. In May, the U.N. Committee against Torture expressed concern about instances of racism and xenophobia in the Czech Republic, including the increase in racially motivated violence against minority groups.

### **European Union**

In its November 2000 regular report on the accession status of the Czech Republic, the European Commission called on the government to improve the situation of Roma and expressed concern over continued disparities in the earnings of women, who take home on average 25 percent less than men performing similar work.

The European Parliament's rapporteur on the Czech Republic produced a

report on the country's accession status in July, expressing concern over political bias at Czech Television and urging the government to take further steps to combat prejudice against Roma. In September, the full Parliament adopted a resolution endorsing the rapporteur's findings.

### **United States**

In its July report on trafficking in persons, the U.S. State Department noted that the Czech Republic's current antitrafficking measures fell short of the minimum international standards. The State Department's report on human rights practices in 2000 expressed concern about the excessive use of force by police, particularly during the IMF/World Bank protests, the failure of police to take sufficient action in cases of threats or attacks against Roma, and skinhead violence against minorities. On International Roma Day (April 8), the U.S. government's Helsinki Commission called on the Czech Republic to make adoption of antidiscrimination laws a priority.

## **GEORGIA**

### **HUMAN RIGHTS DEVELOPMENTS**

Government pressure on a popular independent television station caused mass street protests in late October 2001, to which President Shevardnadze responded by dismissing the entire government. The government's failure to combat crippling levels of corruption, improve living conditions, and resolve the ongoing energy crisis stoked social tension. Law enforcement agencies acquiesced in rising religious violence, and police corruption led to human rights abuses.

Georgian authorities allowed organized groups of civilian militants to conduct a sustained campaign of violent assaults and intimidation against members of several non-Orthodox religious faiths, chiefly Jehovah's Witnesses, Pentacostalists, and Baptists. The assailants broke up religious services, beat congregants, ransacked or looted homes and property, and destroyed religious literature. Vasili Mkalavishvili, a defrocked Georgian Orthodox priest who led most of the attacks, justified them by claiming that charismatic faiths were defiling Georgia's nationhood and religious tradition. He boasted of receiving assistance from the police and security services. Emboldened by the inaction or complicity of prosecutors and police, and by a February Supreme Court decision to deregister the Jehovah's Witnesses as a legal entity in Georgia, the frequency of mob attacks rose in 2001. The Jehovah's Witnesses reported more than forty attacks on their adherents in the first half of the year. Police failed to protect endangered worshippers and in at least one case, played an active role in the attacks. Police on February 27 forced open a gate to a courtyard in Tbilisi where several hundred Jehovah's Witnesses had been wor-