

# EUROPEAN RACE BULLETIN

INSTITUTE OF  
**RACE**  
RELATIONS

## The Italian general election and its aftermath

**'We are facing a wave of racism affecting all immigrants in Italy, those who are documented and those who are not.'**

**Daniela Carboni, Amnesty International**

**'Never again, illegal immigrants under your house.' 'Empty illegal camps and get rid of nomads who have no residence and no means of subsistence.'**

**Popolo della Libertà**

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# The election

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## At a glance

- Stunning successes for the xenophobic Northern League which has four ministers in the cabinet, as does the post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale
- The most right-wing cabinet since the Second World War includes the notorious Islamophobe Roberto Calderoli
- Equalities Ministry controlled by Mara Carfagna, a former beauty queen and topless model who believes gays are 'constitutionally sterile'
- Provincial elections leave Rome in the control of former fascist, Gianni Alemanno
- Convicted terrorist, Roberto Fiore, represents the Social Alternative in the European Parliament

## The general election: results and analysis

Silvio Berlusconi's People of Freedom (Popolo della Libertà, PdL) alliance won a decisive victory over Walter Veltroni's centre-left Democratic Party (Partito Democratico) in the March 2008 general election. The PdL, which includes the anti-immigrant Northern League and the post-fascist Alleanza Nazionale (AN), won 167 of the 315 seats in parliament and now governs with a strong majority.

### *Stunning gains for Northern League*

For a party that only wins votes in the north, the Northern League's results were stunning. It was one of the election's chief big winners (8 per cent of the vote; forty-seven seats in the Chamber of Deputies and twenty-three in the Senate), scoring 28 per cent of the vote in the northern cities and emerging as the largest party in Venice. It doubled its presence in parliament to emerge as the third biggest force (the second being the Democratic Party) in the new legislature, with its representatives in a position to deprive Berlusconi of his majority in both chambers. (Berlusconi's first administration, 1994-96, fell when the Northern League withdrew its support.)

The Northern League fought the election on issues of crime and immigration. One of its campaign posters featured a Native American next to a warning that Italians would end up, as the Indians did, penned into reservations if they did not stop immigrants from taking over the country. One candidate suggested that foreigners should be forced to use separate train carriages. According to Marzio Barbagli, a sociology professor at the University of Bologna, 'More than any other party', the Northern League understood 'public fears and acted on them'.

### *Far-Right allies sought during election campaign*

The PdL drew in the post-fascist AN as well as other figures such as the leader of Social Alternative (Azione Sociale) Alessandra Mussolini and Giuseppe Ciarrapico, a newspaper publisher and former chair of AS Roma, who ran for the Senate. Mussolini told the press that she considered fascism, which was banned in post-war Italy, as part of the country's fabric. And Ciarrapico, after causing a furore when he defended fascism, later attempted to temper his remarks by condemning Mussolini's anti-Jewish laws and stating 'I am a fascist, but in a cultural, not a political way'. Enrico Pugliese, head of the state-funded Institute of Social Politics, told Reuters that neither Alessandra Mussolini, nor Fini represent fascism in Italy, as Fini 'de-fascistised' his party, and Mussolini is a "'folkloric" figure trading on her name for political advantage. The true torchbearer of fascism is the Northern League which has absorbed a great part of fascist thinking, especially the racism.'

### *Election results of far-Right parties*

The May edition of *Searchlight* provided electoral information on the other far-Right parties. The La Destra party (The Right, led by former AN member Francesco Storace) uses as its symbol the old neo-fascist tricolour flame and campaigned for 'God, Fatherland and Family'. It scored 2.4 per cent of the vote. La Destra was founded by post-fascists who broke away from the AN after it allied itself to Berlusconi's Forza Italia. Forza Nuova (FN) got just 0.3 per cent of the total vote.

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## **Two minority ethnic candidates elected**

Only four candidates of immigrant origin were selected by the political parties to run in the general election. Of these, only two candidates of recent immigration origin were elected to the new parliament. The president of the Association of Moroccan Women, Souad Sbai, was elected for the PdL and Senegalese born Jean Leonard Touadi, a former Rome city councillor, was elected for the centre-left Italy of Values Party. The Democratic Party did not field a single candidate of foreign origin. Mustapha Mansouri, president of Italy's Immigrant Party commented ruefully that these two elected representatives now 'have the honour of representing 4 million new citizens living in our country'.

## **Most right-wing parliament and cabinet since Second World War**

The new Berlusconi administration is further to the right than the previous 2001-6 administration, as it does not have the relative moderating influence of Berlusconi's former coalition partner, the Union of Christian and Centre Democrats. For the first time since 1946, there are no Communist or Socialist representatives in parliament. In fact, smaller parties were decimated and the new coalition now has only six parties opposed to it, in contrast to the twenty which opposed the former centre-left coalition government and forced prime minister Romano Prodi to quit.

### ***Cabinet portfolios***

Seven of the ministers in the cabinet (of which there are twelve full ministers and nine ministers without portfolio) are from the Northern League and the AN.

Northern League ministerial appointments

- Roberto Maroni, interior minister which includes the immigration portfolio
- Umberto Bossi, minister of institutional reforms and federalism
- Roberto Calderoli, minister of legislative simplification
- Luca Zaia, agriculture minister

The National Alliance ministerial appointments

- Ignazio La Russa, defence minister
- Altero Matteoli, infrastructure minister
- Gianfranco Fini, President, Chamber Deputies and Speaker of Lower House.

### ***Islamophobe returns to the cabinet***

The appointment of Roberto Calderoli was particularly controversial. Two years ago, Calderoli, as minister for reforms in Berlusconi's last government, achieved notoriety. At the height of the Danish cartoons affair, he ripped off his shirt on live television, revealing a T-shirt printed with one of the drawings. Violent demonstrations in Libya followed and the Italian consulate in Benghazi was attacked by a crowd trying to storm the building. Fifteen people were killed when the police opened fire. Calderoli subsequently resigned his ministerial post. Since then, Calderoli has suggested holding an annual 'pig day' against mosques. (See *Bulletin* no. 62).

What appears to have happened is that in order to get Calderoli back into the cabinet with minimum fuss, a new ministry without portfolio has been created specifically for him. His appointment, led to an immediate protest by a Libyan charity ran by one of Colonel Ghaddafi's sons.

On 8 May, Libya announced that it would cease cooperation with Italy on combating irregular migration and would toughen visa requirements for Italians working in the petroleum industry in Libya. Furthermore, it was considering cancelling an energy contract signed by the two countries in October. It was widely seen as a protest at the appointment of Calderoli who, on 9 May, issued a statement suggesting that he was sorry for the consequences of his past actions, claiming also that his cartoon gesture had been 'misunderstood'. According to Calderoli, he had worn the T-shirt as a 'message of peace' between Christianity and Islam.

At the end of June, Berlusconi visited Libya to discuss the implementation of the accord on immigration signed in December 2007 under which Italian naval vessels, with Libyan sailors onboard, were to patrol the Libyan coastline.

### ***New equalities minister known for anti-gay remarks***

Mara Carfagna, a former topless model and beauty queen who was popular on Berlusconi's TV networks is

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the new minister for equal opportunities. MsCarfagna has made no secret of her dislike of gays and lesbians, saying they are 'constitutionally sterile' and that 'to love means to be able to procreate'.

Carfagna's appointment was seen as a deliberate provocation of the gay community. She refused to back the annual gay march and asserted that homophobia is no longer a problem in Italy. The head of Arcigay said that fourteen gays or lesbians had been murdered in Italy in the past two years.

### **Provincial and municipal elections: results and analysis**

In April, the centre-right parties also gained in regional and mayoral elections which were held in five Italian provinces and forty-three municipalities. The centre-right alliance, which won control of three of the five provinces and half of the municipal posts at stake, ensured that issues of immigration and crime dominated the election, with rapes of an American woman in Milan and a Lesotho woman in Rome blamed on immigrants. The most stunning victory came in Rome, where a former fascist won control of the capital. However, the centre-left candidate Nicola Zingaretti won the presidency of the province of Rome.

#### ***Rome mayoral elections: stunning victory for former neo-fascist***

The Freedom party candidate Gianni Alemanno, a former neo-fascist, won the Rome mayoral election to become its first far-Right mayor since the Second World War. Alemanno received 53.7 per cent of the vote, pushing the centre-left candidate Francesco Rutelli (who had won the first round but failed to secure the necessary 50 per cent), into second place. Followers of Berlusconi supported Alemanno's victory with the Roman fascist straight-arm salute and fascist-era chants, including 'Duce, Duce'.

Silvio Berlusconi welcomed the result, declaring 'We are the new Falange.' (The original Falange was the Spanish fascist party, founded in the 1930s, which supplied Franco's dictatorship with its ideological underpinning.) On his victory, Alemanno, waving an Italian flag from the city hall window, promised to fight crime. He later announced that he would visit the widow of Giovanna Reggiani (see Bulletin no. 63) and that one of his first acts would be to call a meeting of security officials 'to bring order to our territories, and move Rome 'out of its urban blight'.

#### ***Who is Gianni Alemanno?***

Alemanno is a former youth leader of the neo-fascist Italian Social Movement (MSI), the party set up after the Second World War by followers of Mussolini. He left the MSI when it split, and joined the post-fascist AN led by Gianfranco Fini. He has responded to criticisms that he wears a Celtic cross, a symbol of the extreme right, by arguing that he wears it as a religious symbol and in tribute to Paolo di Nella, a far-Right activist apparently stoned to death in a Rome street protest some twenty five years ago.

Alemanno served as an agriculture minister in a previous Berlusconi administration.

#### ***Election campaign targets foreign criminals***

Alemanno's campaign centred on issues of law and order. Two rapes allegedly carried out by Romanians in Rome and Milan which occurred after the first round of voting helped the Freedom Party candidate hammer home his promise to expel from the city 20,000 immigrants who he said had been released after committing crimes.

#### ***Alemanno attempts distancing from far-Right***

Alemanno promised to be the mayor of all Romans and sent telegrams to both the Pope and the Chief Rabbi. But many in the Jewish community expressed alarm at his victory. Eighty Jewish intellectuals, alarmed by the support Alemanno enjoyed from the far-right La Destra party had published an appeal in *l'Unita* calling on voters to reject Alemanno. Alemanno responded by visiting monuments in Rome to Jewish victims of Nazi occupation, Italian wartime resistance heroes and Rome's synagogue. He also attempted to distance himself from the far-Right, complaining that the left attempted to depict him as a fascist and an anti-Semite during the campaign. 'We must condemn any form of ideological extremism regardless of where it comes from', he said.

#### **Neo-fascist with terror conviction secures Euro-seat**

After the resignation of newly-elected MP Alessandra Mussolini from the European parliament, the neo-fascist Roberto Fiore, who was sentenced to a nine-year prison sentence for conspiracy to bomb the Bologna train station in 1980 which left 85 people dead and 200 wounded, has secured a seat in the European parliament

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representing the Social Action/Alternative coalition. British Labour MEP Glyn Ford commented that 'He is absolutely the most extreme person who has ever served in the European parliament.'

On 27 May, clashes were reported at Rome University. Anti-fascists were attacked by far-Right militants, apparently armed with clubs and knives. The anti-fascist students had been attempting to take down posters for a meeting at Rome's La Sapienza university where Fiore was speaking.

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## **Parliamentary programme: security and immigration**

### **At a glance**

- New security package means all Roma living in camps, including children, will be fingerprinted for national census of Roma population
- Major attack on migrant workers through new offences criminalising illegal immigration
- Asylum seekers could lose right of appeal, but plan to use the Italian navy to force boats out of territorial waters may be illegal
- Measures promoting equality and cultural diversity threatened

### **New government focuses on security and immigration**

Even before the new cabinet had agreed its strategy, Berlusconi set about wooing his Northern League allies promising lower taxes, more police and camps for jobless foreigners who he described as an 'army of evil'. In a TV interview, Berlusconi said 'One of the things to do is to close the frontiers and set up more camps to identify foreign citizens who don't have jobs and are forced into a life of crime'. He added that Italy also needed 'more local police constituting an army of good in the squares and streets, to come between Italian people and the army of evil'. The *International Herald Tribune* (15.5.08) cites PdL campaign material as stating 'Never again, illegal immigrants under your house ... Empty illegal camps and get rid of nomads who have no residence and no means of subsistence.'

Introducing a new package of security reforms on 21 May, prime minister Berlusconi said it was intended to assure 'the right of Italians not to be afraid – a fundamental right that the state must guarantee'. Interior minister Roberto Maroni had already promised a five-point zero tolerance strategy against illegal immigration, but his plan to create new offences to criminalise illegal immigrants was criticised, even within the cabinet itself. However, on July 15, the lower house of parliament approved the legislation by a wide margin.

### ***Criminalising illegal immigration***

Interior Minister Roberto Maroni immediately drew up a package on security, crime and immigration. He vowed to make illegal immigration a criminal offence punishable by up to four years imprisonment and hinted that anyone helping an illegal immigrant with a job or an apartment would also be criminalised. DNA tests on illegal immigrants would be obligatory. The cabinet also agreed to the confiscation of property let to illegal immigrants. Adults who force children to beg will face imprisonment. A survey by Italy's Sky News 24 TV channel suggested that nine out of ten Italians backed the criminalisation laws. In addition, non-Italians convicted of crimes will face penalties one-third stiffer than those handed down to Italians.

By the first week in June, after pressure from Italian businesses, the Vatican and UN human rights officer, Louise Arbour, prime minister Berlusconi seemed to backtrack on the measure, by making a distinction between the illegal presence of foreigners and their eventual criminal behaviour. Two weeks after signing the draft law, Berlusconi expressed his 'personal opinion' that people would not be prosecuted simply for being illegal immigrants. Instead, their status would be considered an aggravating circumstance if they committed a crime. Interior minister Maroni, quoted by the public TV channel RAI, criticised Berlusconi's statement. 'The law is already in force, it considers illegal migration a crime, it has been approved two weeks ago by the Government with unanimity and bears Berlusconi's signature.' However, other ministers, such as welfare minister Maurizio Sacconi, had also questioned the law.

### ***Removing asylum seekers' right of appeal***

UNHCR immediately raised concerns about the proposal to withdraw the right of appeal from asylum seekers



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whose claims have been rejected. According to the Italian Refugee Council, around 30 per cent of asylum seekers win their claim on appeal.

### ***Sea blockade considered***

Interior minister Maroni said that Italy should consider stemming the tide of illegal immigration by applying an 'iron fist' to stem the flow, specifically by using the Navy and Coast Guards to prevent immigrant boats entering Italian territorial waters. At the moment, no details of any scheme, which would probably be illegal if implemented, have been released. Article 98 (1) of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea requires states to 'render assistance to any person found at sea in danger of being lost' while regulation 33 (1) of the Safety of Life at Sea convention binds all vessels to 'proceed with all speed' to the assistance of vessels in trouble. The 1979 Maritime Search and Rescue Convention (MSAR) demands that assistance be available 'regardless of the nationality or status of such persons or the circumstances in which that person is found. MSAR obliges provision be made for medical needs and delivery to a safe place. Sources within the Italian maritime authorities kept a diplomatic silence when the proposal was announced, although one unnamed senior Italian maritime source quoted in *Lloyds List* said that 'Without having seen any details, I would say it will simply amount to tightening up patrols to deter illegal immigration. I cannot imagine that if a vessel were in trouble they would not help out.'

### ***More border controls***

Maroni also promised to re-impose border controls for travellers from the Schengen zone. This proposal was seen as a response to the immigration of Romanians and eastern European Roma, although, paradoxically, Romania, which joined the EU last year, is not part of the Schengen system. Calin Tariceanu, prime minister of Romania, warned that such plans could fuel 'xenophobic attitudes' and harm bilateral relations.

### ***Easing expulsions***

The new package will make it easier to expel foreigners, including EU citizens, convicted of criminal offences.

### ***New powers for local authorities***

Local authorities will be empowered to check on living conditions of citizens from other EU nations before granting rights of residence. There have been reports that the government intend to create a minimum income requirement for immigrants, including those from other EU countries, who want to visit for more than three months.

## **Measures targeting Roma and Gypsies**

### **A national census of Roma based on fingerprinting**

In June, interior minister Roberto Maroni announced that a national census on the Gypsy population living in camps should take place and that it should involve fingerprinting all those living in camps, including children. The announcement led to protests from abroad, notably from UN special rapporteur on racism, Doudou Diene, UNICEF, the European parliament and the Council of Europe, with Maroni branding his critics 'hypocrites'. But within Italy, according to the Catholic weekly *Famiglia Cristiana*, the 'indecent proposal' was met with a 'deafening silence'. A television poll, the unscientific nature of which was criticised, showed that just over 80 percent of the public were in favour. By 15 July, reports *Agence France Presse*, Gypsies living in Milan and Naples had been fingerprinted, but not in Rome, where there is growing opposition to the policy.

### ***Discriminatory measure questioned***

A spokesman for the European Commission said a member state singling out an ethnic group for fingerprinting would be breaking EU rules against discrimination. In a (non-binding) resolution adopted by 336 votes to 220, the European parliament called on Italy to bring the practice to an immediate halt, adding that it clearly constitute 'an act of discrimination based on race and ethnic origin'. A similar point was made by Vincenzo Spadafora, head of UNICEF in Italy, who said that the government would be acting in a discriminatory fashion, 'unless it fingerprinted every child in Italy'. 'By explicitly associating the Roma to

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criminality, and by calling for the immediate dismantling of Roma camps in the country, these officials have created an overall environment of hostility, antagonism and stigmatisation' said UN special rapporteur for racism Doudou Diene.

Within Italy, opposition has come from prominent Catholic voices and the Jewish community. The *Guardian* of 10 July, reports that Roma groups have demonstrated wearing the black triangles Gypsies were forced to wear in the Nazi concentration camps, and anti-racist campaigners in Rome bombarded the interior ministry with their own fingerprints in protest. The chief rabbi of Rome insisted it 'must be stopped now'. Amos Luzzatto, a former head of the Union of Jewish Communities in Italy warned that 'Italy is a country that has lost its memory'. 'You start like this, then you move on to the exclusion from schools, separate classes and widespread discrimination', he told *La Repubblica*.

Maroni, as well as foreign minister Franco Frattini responded by attempting to portray the census and fingerprinting schemes as means of establishing the rights of Roma children who are made to beg, instead of attending school. It would not be an 'ethnic register' according to Maroni, but a way of establishing rights. Frattini commented 'We are not talking of raids (against Roma communities) or anything of the sort, but a measure to identify living in our country.' On 1 July, education minister Mariastella Gelmini stated that around two-thirds of Roma children living in Italy fail to attend school. Gelmini's comments came in response to an article the mass circulation Catholic weekly newspaper *Famiglia Cristiana* which had accused the government of racism. 'A state cannot call itself Catholic, nor attentive, if it pretends not to see that Roma children are not in school and are being used as beggars instead', commented Gelmini.

#### ***More details of scheme***

Maroni is adamant that the plan will be implemented, starting in Naples, Rome and Milan as newly-appointed Roma commissioners start carrying out a census of Italy's Roma and Gypsy populations. Maroni wants a census of the Roma camps, as reports indicate that the estimate of 160,000 Roma in Italy may be an underestimate of 100,000.

#### ***Red Cross criticised***

Maroni also said that the police would carry out the census accompanied by the Italian Red Cross, a fact confirmed by Massimo Barra, the head of the Italian Red Cross who told *The Times* on 5 July that he believed the aim of the project was to integrate Roma people into Italian society. If children were to be fingerprinted, it would be done 'as a game' he said, because the Red Cross 'always respects human rights. We are building bridges not walls.' In a statement published in the *Sudtiroler Zeitung* on 10 July, Maroni stated that the government of Silvio Berlusconi is proud of the participation of the Red Cross in the ethnic registration and fingerprinting of Roma.

In a press release, the European Centre for Antiziganism Research condemned the Red Cross involvement in the strongest possible terms and called on the International Red Cross to immediately withdraw from the scheme. It described the decision to collaborate as chillingly reminiscent of Red Cross collaboration with the Nazis during the Second World War. Moreover, the Berlusconi's government's justification for its scheme is also similar to arguments deployed in Nazi Germany where the registration of Roma and Sinti were justified as a measure necessary for crime prevention.

#### ***The role of special commissioners for the Roma***

There has been criticism of the plan to appoint special commissioners for the Roma – the functions of which, it appears, would be to oversee the demolition of Gypsy encampments and deportation policies. On 20 June, Maroni's top aide was reported to have imposed a vow of silence on three special commissioners appointed to deal with what the media calls 'the Roma emergency'.

#### ***Demolition of nomad camps***

One of the first tasks of the Milan commissioner will be to demolish over sixty illegal Roma camps on the outskirts of the city. Promising to appoint a special commissioner for the Roma Gypsies in Rome, mayor Alemanno said 'We are not talking about Sinti or fairground folk, but a growing invasion – it's an emergency.' 'There are 16 million nomadic people living in Europe and if these mass movements are not controlled, there is the risk that all those people move from the poorest countries to those considered to be richer.'

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One camp due for demolition was the Roma camp on Via Casilina, on the eastern outskirts of Rome, next to a disused airfield. By the end of May, forty huts had already been dismantled and 150 of the camp's 800 inhabitants had already left. Senada Salkanovic and her husband told the *Times* (29.5.08) that most of the camp's inhabitants were refugees from the Balkans. 'They say we are thieves, but I work as a cleaner. 'The government is stoking up fear.' The Chief Rabbi of Rome, Hanifa Rustic, visited a Roma encampment in the southwestern suburb of Magliana to express his solidarity with the camp's inhabitants. As Mioara Miclescu, a Romanian woman living at the camp who runs a laundry employing Roma woman, told The Times: 'Many illegal immigrants are not the muggers and pickpockets of popular nightmare but badanti – cleaners and carers for the elderly who cannot obtain residence permits because of bureaucratic obstacles.'

### **Measures targeting 'foreign criminals'**

In the second week of May 2008, defence minister Ignazio La Russa said that he would consider deploying soldiers on Italian streets to help fight crime. The Northern League also promised to back the formation of citizens' defence groups to fight crime. On 29 May, Umberto Bossi said that immigrants had to be hunted down, adding that if reforms were not forthcoming, his followers would have to take up arms. He also vowed to tackle the Left. 'We have no fear of taking things to the piazzas. We have 300,000 martyrs ready to come down from the mountains. Our rifles are always smoking', he said.

### ***Police round-up suspects for deportation***

Already, on 14 May, the police announced that following a week-long operation stretching from northern Italy to the Naples area, they had arrested nearly 400 people, with 118 people immediately expelled and a further 111 accused of immigration controls (different newspapers cite different statistics). In the first press conference of the new government on security issues, the police officer in charge of the operation, Francesco Gratteri, stated that most of the foreigners arrested were Romanian and North African and that Romanian police had assisted with the operation which had targeted 'geographical areas with particular problems'. Gratteri stated that 115 Italians had also been arrested, with 111 people accused of helping migrants enter the country illegally.

### ***New security package for Rome***

As he was sworn into office, Rome's new mayor Alemanno promised to make Rome 'secure'. His first action would be to begin 'immediate expulsions' of the 20,000 illegal immigrants in the city with criminal records. He also promised to raze eighty-five Gypsy camps. 'We cannot welcome them without discipline', he said. 'We will chase out the delinquents. There are eighty-five abusive nomad camps to destroy'. Graziano Halilovic, a spokesman for one of Rome's biggest settlements of Roma said, 'We fear there will be night-time raids on the camps. We want a safe city too. Some of our members have heard their parents' stories of fascism.'

### ***Migrant camps raided***

One of the raids was on a makeshift Roma camp on the edge of Rome, home to 700 people, mostly Romanians, Serbians and Bosnians. The European Roma Information Office stated on 20 May, that large-scale arbitrary arrests took place in Florence, with hundreds of Roma registered and fingerprinted in preparation for deportation.

### ***Pressure for more expulsions***

Milan's conservative deputy mayor, Riccardo de Corato, said that the problem was 'Italy has 700,000 illegal immigrants, but carried out about 1,500 expulsions in 2007. The numbers speak for themselves. 'People who want to work are welcome in Milan, but if you want to beg, go and do it in Bucharest'. Amidst Italian concerns about the impact of the laws on services, the government stated that up to 400,000 people, whose paperwork was not in order but who provide a service in the home such as housekeeping or childcare would not be targeted.

### ***Italian and Romanian governments agree to talks***

The Romanian prime minister Calin Popescu-Tariceanu agreed to meet with Berlusconi to discuss the recent spate of violence involving Romanians in Italy. As police cracked down on illegal immigrants in the second week of May, Romanian interior minister Cristian David visited Italy and warned that Italy's crackdown could



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cause 'xenophobia' against other Romanians. Marcella Lucidi, the outgoing Italian undersecretary of the interior responsible for immigration, said that while 'Citizens' fears should be taken seriously', 'politicians have the responsibility not to fuel fear. 'The real risk of a society that lives by fear is to divide people and that leads to ostracism and discrimination.'

### **Rome: historical revisionism threatens cultural diversity**

*New York Times* (25.6.08) reports that the Rome city council has now abandoned an intercultural city programme where schoolchildren were served an international-themed lunch once a month.

The July 2008 edition of *Searchlight* reports that Alemanno has made it a priority to honour Giorgio Almirante, an iconic figure from Italy's fascist past by having a street named after him. Almirante, who served under Mussolini's Salo Republic, was the author of 'In Defence of the Race' and in May 1944 he signed measures which led to the killing of eighty-three anti-fascists. After the war, he was instrumental in setting up the Movimento Sociale Italiano (MSI), the neo-fascist party of which Gianfranco Fini was the national secretary in the 1980s.

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## **Racism**

### ***At a glance***

- Neapolitan mafia believed to have played a large role in razing of Roma camps in Naples
- Northern League's promotion of vigilante committees to fight crime emboldens far-Right
- Verona, under Northern League mayor, Flavio Tossi, emerges as centre of concern. Town council approves demolition of mosque, as neo-Nazis beat Nicola Tommasoli to death.

### **Arson and intimidation as anti-Roma mobs rampage in Naples**

The worst outbreaks of violence occurred from May 13-15. Following rumours that a Roma teenager had attempted to kidnap a baby in the Ponticelli district of Naples, mobs went on the rampage, burning Gypsy camps. At around the same time, results of an opinion poll were released which suggested that 68 per cent of Italians wanted to see all the country's 150,000 Gypsies, many of whom are Italian citizens, expelled. In a second poll, 81 per cent of Italian respondents said they found all Gypsies, Romanian or not 'barely likeable, or not likeable at all'.

On the nights of 13 and 14 May, the Ponticelli camp on the outskirts of eastern Naples was subjected to repeated petrol bombs attacks. As the first Molotov cocktails descended on the encampment on the 13 May, Roma fled to another encampment, which was also attacked, leading to evacuation. The Catholic charities Caritas and Sant'Egidio, which had provided food, medical and social aid to the Gypsies for years, helped them to flee, sheltering them at a school.

Many newspapers and reports suggest that the Camorra, the Neapolitan equivalent of the Mafia, played an important role in the destruction of the Ponticelli camp. *Migration News Sheet* reports that dozens of youths arrived on scooters and motorbikes, armed with iron bars and Molotov cocktails, setting fire to the Roma encampment. Firemen were prevented from dealing with the blaze, with gas canisters thrown into the fire, causing explosions and complete destruction of the shanty towns. Young Neapolitans, shouting 'Out, out. You're dirty and smelly and rob babies', were reported to have boasted that they were undertaking 'ethnic cleansing'.

### ***Politicians respond***

Commenting on the attacks, the Northern League's Umberto Bossi said that 'People are going to do what the political class cannot' and interior minister Roberto Maroni declared 'That is what happens when Gypsies steal babies'. But Rome's police chief Carlo Mosca said such behaviour was unacceptable, adding that 'Foreigners are not the enemy'. *The Independent* of 16 May, accused politicians of shedding belated crocodile tears. After the raising of the encampment, Naples mayor, Rosa Russo Iervolino declared that 'It is unthinkable that anyone could imagine that I could justify reprisals against the Roma.' Antonio Bassolino, governor of the Campania region, also stated that 'We must stop with the greatest determination these disturbing episodes against the Roma.'

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The EveryOne Group carried out an investigation and concluded that the so-called 'child-kidnapping' incident in Ponticelli, Naples, that sparked the attacks on Gypsy camps, was, a set-up by residents who laid a trap for a Roma girl in order to pressurise the authorities to close down the Gypsy camp at Ponticelli. The teenager has been charged with abduction and burglary.

### ***Rome Gypsies organise***

Bosnian Gypsies in Rome announced that they were mounting nightly patrols of their camp to defend themselves against vigilante attacks.

### ***Vatican appeals for calm***

On 15 May, the Pope appealed for more acceptance. Cardinal Angelo Bagnasco said that while fear was understandable it could never be right for people to take the law into their own hands.

### ***UN denounces racism***

A UN spokeswoman expressed horror at the scenes in Italy, comparing them to the forced migration of Gypsies from the Balkans. 'The hostility is a result of the generally inflammatory language of the current government, as well as the previous one', said EveryOne director Laura Boldrini. 'Italian football stars at Milan teams assumed to have Gypsy heritage, such as Andrea Pirlo, are now also the subject of threatening chants.'

### ***Cardinal shocked by children's xenophobia***

On 30 May, the *Daily Mail* reported that the Cardinal of Naples, Crescenio Sepe was shocked when it was revealed that children at the Istituto San Giovanni Bosco, in Ponticelli, some as young as 9, had drawn pictures supporting the anti-Roma violence and written essays in which they said 'Burning the houses of the Roma is justified' and 'They steal babies and use them for begging or sell their organs for transplants' and 'The people did well to burn the camps at Ponticelli. They didn't go when asked nicely, so we had to use strong methods.' According to the Cardinal, this 'shows that these young minds have been affected by an extremist ideology. To think these children believe it is right to burn camps.'

## **Details of other serious incidents**

The newspapers widely reported that vigilante patrols had been set up in many Italian towns with mayors given special powers to ensure 'public safety.' The targets for far-Right violence include migrants, Roma, homosexuals, indeed anyone deemed different.

**11 May, Milan:** The European Roma Information Office (ERIO) reports that on May 11, extremists threw molotov cocktails at the Roma camp in via Novara, Milan.

**13 May, Genoa:** Around 100 residents in the Teglia district protest outside an immigrant camp, which they said was full of filth and criminals, reports the *Telegraph* of 14 May

**24 May, Rome:** Christian Floris, who works for a gay website in Rome, was assaulted outside his house by two men, reports the *Guardian* on 26th May.

**26 May, Rome:** Armed masked group rampage through the multi-ethnic Pigneto neighbourhood of Rome, smashing shop windows and hurling abuse. A food shop owned by an Indian and two Bangladeshi-run stores were attacked. Reports, which seem to have emanated from the police, suggested that the attack was in response to earlier row between an Italian man and a North African over stolen money, which the shopkeepers had harboured. 'Italy is not a racist country. Episodes of this kind are sometimes inflamed by crimes committed by illegal immigrants', said interior minister Roberto Maroni. Later, however, mayor Alemanno, visited the shopkeepers and offered them compensation. He blamed the attacks on the problems created by the previous centre-left administration.

## **Focus on Verona**

### ***Neo-nazis beat young Italian to death***

Both the Northern League and the AN were criticised for their response to the murder of a 29-year-old Italian man by neo-Nazis. Five men, believed to be neo-Nazi fans of the football team Hellas Verona, were arrested after beating to death Nicola Tommasoli, simply because he refused to give them a cigarette. The attack,

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which happened on 1 May, left 29-year-old Tommasoli in a coma. He was later pronounced clinically dead. Two of the suspects fled to London, but were arrested on their return. The three other assailants were already under arrest.

**Northern League mayor denies racism link:** Flavio Tosi, the Northern League mayor of Verona, who has promised to crack down on illegal immigrants, dismissed the far-Right motive of the crime, as well as any link between his party and Tommasoli's assailants. 'Verona is not a city of neo-fascists and it does not deserve this shameful label because of the actions of a few hooligans', he said.

**Opposition responds:** Verona's centre-Left opposition said that the murder was a sign of growing intolerance. The Right fought the election on fear of immigrant crime, and this murder was the result of that. 'The responsibility lies with right-wing populists', said Paolo Ferrero, a left minister in the caretaker administration which governed until the new government was sworn in. He accused the far Right of creating 'scapegoats' for Italy's social problem that 'brings in votes in a climate of insecurity, but also sows a long trail of hate'.

**Fini downplays significance of murder:** AN leader Gianfranco Fini was roundly criticised after stating during a television interview that the 1 May burning of the Israeli flag by the far-left in Turin was 'much more serious' than the murder of Nicola Tommasoli. Post-fascist Fini achieved respectability, and became a member of a previous Berlusconi administration, when he visited Israel in November 2003 declaring support for the state and expressing 'shame' for Italy's racial laws under fascism. Former Social Affairs Minister Paolo Ferrera said his comments were 'incredible and unworthy of someone holding such an important institutional role'. Turin Mayor Sergio Chiamparino, who had criticised the flag burning incident at the time it took place, said Fini's 'ranking of ignoble acts' was a serious mistake. Fini responded by arguing that he had been misunderstood. His claims had been prefaced by a statement demanding 'zero-tolerance' for neo-Nazi violence. What he was trying to convey was that the murder of Tommasoli had been non-ideological in nature, while the flag-burning incident had been.

#### ***Court ruling legitimises Tosi's initiative against Gypsies***

Italy's highest appeal court has overthrown a conviction against six people for distributing racially discriminatory propaganda. The six defendants, which included Flavio Tosi (a Northern League official at the time, he was elected mayor later) signed a leaflet demanding the expulsion of Verona's Gypsies in 2001.

Although the court made its judgement in March 2008, it was not widely reported until June. The legal decision was seen as justification for the government's clampdown on the Roma. It was published hours before police in Verona arrested eight Roma of Croatian origin accused of having induced minors to carry out burglaries in northern Italy. The judgement effectively makes it lawful to discriminate against Roma, on the grounds that they are thieves.

Tosi was quoted by a witness at the original trial as saying, 'The Gypsies must be ordered out because, wherever they arrive, there are robberies.' The appeal court ruled that this did not show that Tosi was a racist, but that he had 'a deep aversion [to Roma] that was not determined by the Gypsy nature of the people discriminated against, but by the fact that all the Gypsies were thieves.' His dislike of them was 'not therefore based on a notion of superiority or racial hatred, but on racial prejudice'.

#### ***Northern League bulldoze mosque***

The Northern League in Verona ordered the destruction of a mosque and announced that it will be turned into a park and car park which will be named after the late Oriana Fallaci who was notorious for her anti-Islam stance. Ali Abu Shwaima, head of the Milan-based Islamic Centre, was reported in Islam Online on 24 May as saying that the destruction of the mosque 'reinforces Muslim fears of seeing the League in the ruling coalition'. There are around 20,000 Muslims living in Verona.

#### **Mestre: Northern League campaigns against Sinti settlement**

On 23 June, the AKI news agency reported that the Northern League parliamentarian Corrado Callegari and local party councillor Alberto Mazzonetto are attempting to prevent the city council from constructing a new settlement for Sinti Gypsies in the northeastern town of Mestre. A local committee, which had staged protests at other Gypsy sites, are demanding a plebiscite on the planned Sinti Gypsy settlement which was

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to have included houses and a caravan park to accommodate some 40 Sinti families. The Northern League argues that the Sinti are being given preferential treatment and that the money should be spent on a shelter for homeless Italian citizens from the Mestre-Veneto area. The mayor of Venice Massimo Cacciari temporarily halted building work on the site.

### **Milan: mosque to be closed down**

In July, interior minister Roberto Maroni announced that the Jenner mosque in Milan will be closed down by August and that anyone found praying in the street will be fined. The local Muslim community will be offered use of a local stadium but only on the condition that it is used four times a week and each person is charged on entry. Monsignor Gianfranco Bottoni, the Roman Catholic priest in charge of inter-faith relations in Milan said that only a fascist or populist government would resort to such dictatorial methods of closing a mosque. President of the mosque, Abdel Hamid Shaari, said he is happy to pay rent but Muslims would not be treated like 'nomads'. 'We are Milanese and we are not going to accept the solution that's being offered' he said.

### **Racism and historical revisionism – some comments**

Against the backcloth of this racial violence and the security measures announced by the government, many political commentators are asking whether the climate produced by Berlusconi's victory has led to a new form of authoritarianism and a whitewashing of Italy's fascist past.

In an interesting piece in the *Guardian*, Tobias Jones, author of *The Dark Heart of Italy* and of *Utopian Dreams*, asked whether the triumph of the right heralded a return to fascism? Is Italy's richest man, Berlusconi, owner of all the commercial TV channels, bar two, a Italian version of Rupert Murdoch presiding over a cabinet of far-right footsoldiers? Many Italian commentators laugh off accusations that Italy is drifting towards fascism, but Jones believes they are downplaying the cultural backdrop to Italian politics, represented by the rehabilitation of Mussolini and the constant anti-immigration rhetoric. He pointed out that *The Rage and Pride* by Oriana Fallaci, is the sacred text of the anti-immigration movement, and the rhetoric against foreigners is relentless. Martin Jacques, also writing in the *Guardian* (1.5.08), pointed out that the 'fact that the fascists are such an integral feature of modern Italian history, having governed from 1922 until their final defeat in 1945, means that the tradition's values, symbols, philosophies, assumptions, prejudices and emotions remain embedded in the Italian psyche, ready to be reawakened by a new generation.'

#### ***Rehabilitating Mussolini***

These two newspaper articles suggest that rather than being demonised, Mussolini has been re-evaluated and rehabilitated. There has been a subtle shift in historiography with partisans and fascists both seen as legitimate combatants and patriots caught up in a national tragedy. This is accompanied by a national resurgence of nostalgia. Magazines about Mussolini are forever on sale in newsagent-boutiques. In Predappio, his home-town, there is a cottage industry selling Mussolini busts and fascist paraphernalia. The mausoleum is a place of pilgrimage and there is always a queue of pilgrims. The graffiti adorning the walls of many Italian cities is a Celtic cross, the modern equivalent of the swastika.

#### ***The problem for anti-fascists***

The anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight* is concerned that 'Italian anti-fascists today are dangerously close to being treated like an unwanted minority'. Both the government opposition and the media took an equidistant view of the clashes between the far-Right and anti-fascist protestors at Rome's university. The media are accused of equating anti-fascism with juvenile delinquency, and, alongside politicians of both Left and Right, of contributing to xenophobia through its reporting of crime.

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### **Countering myths and establishing facts**

The current onslaught on the rights of Roma and migrants living in Italy is justified by racist stereotypes and the demonisation of whole communities. A completely false picture of these communities is painted – one that fails to acknowledge both the hardships migrants and Roma face in Italian society, and the



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contribution they have made to its economic and social life. The information below is aimed at providing the facts that can challenge the myths.

### **Basic facts about Italy's Gypsy communities**

Gypsies have been living in Italy for seven centuries. About 70,000 Gypsies in Italy hold Italian passports (0.3 per cent of total population), including about 30,000 descended from 15th-century Gypsy settlers in the country. The remainder have arrived since, many fleeing the Balkans during the 1990s. Caritas believes up to 556,000 Roma may now be living in Italy while the EveryOne group estimates that another 10,000 Gypsies came from Romania after it joined the EU in January 2007. Research by the EveryOne group suggests that 90,000 of the 150,000 Gypsies living in Italy are children. Infant mortality among Roma children is fifteen times higher than that of other children. The average life expectancy of the Roma in Italy is 35, compared with 80 for other citizens.

### **Countering the 'foreign = crime' equation**

The way that crime statistics in Italy are broken down seems to be fuelling prejudice and encouraging misconceptions about crime. While much of the media reports these statistics uncritically, some are more critical of the way the Italian interior ministry collates its crime statistics and its failure to acknowledge the role of the mafia in everyday crime.

#### ***The role of official crime statistics in generating misconceptions***

The June 2008 edition of *Migration News Sheet* provides some important counter-arguments. According to the interior ministry, Romanians are the most likely to commit sexual violence. But *Migration News Sheet* draws attention to statistical evidence on rapes which shows that by far the most common perpetrators of rape in Italy are Italian men and their victims are very often people known to them. Only 3.4 per cent of rapes reported in 2006 were committed by an 'unknown person', which could include a 'foreigner'.

Interior ministry crime statistics, widely cited in the run-up to the elections, suggested that crime had grown about 5 per cent in two years, but more slowly than this in Rome. The most significant rise was in burglaries and muggings. The statistics were broken down in such a way as to suggest that 35 per cent of all crimes were committed by foreigners, with the list topped by immigrants from Romania. According to the statistics, from the first eight months of 2007, the most recent available, about 15 per cent of all foreigners charged with crimes were Romanian, a figure that rose to 75 per cent in Rome.

#### ***The role of organised crime***

According to statistics provided by *The New Statesman*, 7 per cent of the Italian economy is generated by organised crime. This is a theme also taken up by Misha Glenny in a *Guardian* article entitled, 'This xenophobia reveals the power of organised crime'. 'Naples is Italy's disgrace and Europe's shame ... the real source of social chaos' in Naples is not Gypsies but 'the Camorra itself', which is linked to the plague of heroin and cocaine use in the city. Furthermore, Camorra families have corrupted virtually every district council in Naples.'

#### ***Creating illegality, creates crime***

Franco Pittau, coordinator of the annual statistics report commissioned by Caritas/Migrantes, the social service arm of the Roman Catholic church, pointed out that as foreigners live in a precarious situation, low-level crime might be reversed if Italy implemented programmes to assist new arrivals.

#### ***Press reporting on Roma obscures truth about organised crime***

The EveryOne group also attempted to counter inflammatory press reporting on the Roma and crime.. For instance, in the Giovanna Reggiani case (see Bulletin.no. 63) it attempted to inform the press that the alleged murderer, Romulus Mailat, was not a Roma, but a Romanian of the Bunjas ethnic group which has no connection to the Gypsy population. The group also pointed out that Roma citizens involved in crime are nearly always in the pay of the Italian Mafia, which – due to the conditions of hardship and segregation the Gypsies live in – have reduced them to near slavery. A local policeman, quoted in the *Gulf Times* on condition of anonymity said, 'It is very likely that the Camorra were involved in the fires. This crime (the alleged



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kidnapping) probably suited a lot of people who had scores to settle with the Roma and wanted to get rid of them.'

### **Countering myths about Romanian Roma in Italy**

Newspaper reports of the specific issues of Romanian Roma living in Italy nearly always fail to analyse the social conditions that propelled them to leave Romania. 'Come Closer, Inclusion and Exclusion of Roma in Present-Day Romanian Society', is a 2008 study commissioned by the National Agency for Roma in Bucharest. It quotes police officer Stefan Campean from the General Police Inspectorate's view that Roma do not commit more crimes than non-Roma in Romania. Where offences are committed, they are for petty crime, often involving food thefts. The report also showed that 60 per cent of Roma interviewed said someone in their family had gone to bed hungry in the past month. Over 50 per cent of Roma children do not have a winter coat and another 50 per cent live in a household that cannot afford shoes for all members. 'Roma are generally informally employed, on a daily basis, mostly in unqualified occupations which require hard physical work, but which are stigmatised as temporary, inferior occupations.' With government inaction to improve their condition, working abroad remains 'the main strategy for emancipation' for Roma.

### **The truth about undocumented workers in Italy**

The debate about illegal immigrants masks the truth about Italy's undocumented migrant workers – namely that they are a hugely exploited but vital component of the welfare state. In fact, the proposal to prosecute those deemed to have aided illegal immigrants to gain employment is ludicrous given the dependence of a substantial part of the Italian population on 'live in aides' (primarily from eastern Europe, the Philippines and South America) to care for the elderly and in domestic work. An analysis provided by Elizabetta Povoledo in the *International Herald Tribune* (23.6.08) refers to this as an 'informal, do-it-yourself welfare system that preserves the importance of the family by bringing in aides into houses rather than shipping aged parents to nursing homes.' In Italy, where life expectancy is increasing and the birthrate is among the world's lowest, the market for foreign home-care aides is expected to swell. Yet, because the annual quotas for legal immigration are so small, the current welfare system depends on clandestine immigrants with less affluent families seeking the low-cost solutions it provides. An illegal aide can cost far less than the established contractual salary. It also needs to be pointed out that the regularisation system, that could bring relief to such workers, is in chaos. Several hundred immigrants and Roma took part in a protest against the criminalisation of illegal entry. They pointed out that the administrative system for granting regularisation is a mess, and the government is currently processing a backlog of around 729,000 applications for legal residence.

Business associations have also spoken out against the law. Unimpresa, an association of Italian entrepreneurs, has warned against the economic repercussions of the governments attitudes towards Romanians. Trade between Romania and Bucharest is estimated to be worth about 12 billion Euros to Italy. According to the chair of Unimpresa, Stefano Albarosa, Italian firms in Romania employ some 800,000 people.

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### **Statements and petitions issued against xenophobia and in defence of the Roma**

■ Petition Against the creation of an Ethnic Registry through the fingerprinting of the Roma circulated by EveryOne Group

<<http://www.petitiononline.com/08041971/petition.html>>

■ Rom News Network Protest letter sent to the Italian Representative of the Council Europe concerning the introduction of fingerprinting of the Roma

<<http://romnews.com/community/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=2030&mode=&orde>>

■ Statement from European Roma Policy Coalition, 'Anti-Roma events are a wake-up call for the EU'. (Signed by Amnesty International, European Roma Rights Centre, European Roma Information Office, European Network for Anti-Racism, Open Society Institute, Spolu International Foundation, Minority Rights Group, European Roma Grassroots Organisation, Roma Education Fund, Frundacion Secretariado Gitano.

<[www.soros.org/initiatives/roma/news/anti\\_20080520/anti\\_20080520.pdf](http://www.soros.org/initiatives/roma/news/anti_20080520/anti_20080520.pdf)>

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- Press release from the European Roma Information Office on the Italian Crisis  
<<http://erionet.org/site/basic100070.html>>
  - Press release 'OSCE Human Rights Body concerned about anti-Roma violence in Italy'  
< [www.osce.org/item/31147.html](http://www.osce.org/item/31147.html)>
  - Statement European Commission against Racism and Intolerance on recent events affecting Roma and immigrants in Italy  
<[http://www.coe.int/t/e/human\\_rights/ecri/1-ECRI/5-Current\\_events/53-eng\\_20\\_06\\_2008.asp#TopOfPage](http://www.coe.int/t/e/human_rights/ecri/1-ECRI/5-Current_events/53-eng_20_06_2008.asp#TopOfPage)>
  - Statement of Associazione Studi Giuridici sull'Immigrazione  
<[www.asgi.it/index.php?page=nws.home&idint=cn08051700](http://www.asgi.it/index.php?page=nws.home&idint=cn08051700)>
  - Statements of Italiano Per I Rifugiati  
<[onlus.org/Comunicato%20Stampa%2028%20maggio%202008.htm](http://onlus.org/Comunicato%20Stampa%2028%20maggio%202008.htm)>
  - Statement of European Network Against Racism 'Stop the Racist Violence in Italy'  
<[cms.horus.be/files/99935/MediaArchive/pdfpress/2008-05-19%20anti-Roma%20events%20Italy.pdf](http://cms.horus.be/files/99935/MediaArchive/pdfpress/2008-05-19%20anti-Roma%20events%20Italy.pdf)>S
  - Statement of European Center for Antiziganism Research, 'Red Cross Collaborates in Ethnic Filing of Roma in Italy'  
<[www.openpr.com/news/48590/Red-Cross-Collaborates-in-Ethnic-Filing-of-Roma-in-Italy.html](http://www.openpr.com/news/48590/Red-Cross-Collaborates-in-Ethnic-Filing-of-Roma-in-Italy.html)>

In addition to the statements and press releases cited above, this summary of recent events in Italy is drawn from the following sources: *Guardian* 15, 28, 29, 30.4, 1, 2, 5, 17, 22, 26.5, 26.6, 1, 10.7.08; *Times* 29.5.08; *Reuters* 8, 21, 28.4, 6, 11, 14, 15.5.08, *Kronos International* 15, 25.4, 12.5.08; *Lloyds List* 13.5.08; *Telegraph* 14, 23.5, 26.6.08; *EurActive* 4.6.08; *Earth Times* 30.6.08; *International Herald Tribune* 25, 30.4, 15.5.08; *BBC News Online* 6, 15, 16.5, 11.7.08; *Agence France Presse* 20.5, 15.7.08; *Migration News Sheet* December 2007, June 2008; *Searchlight* June, July 2008, *New York Times* 29.4, 25.6.08, *Jewish Chronicle* 2.5.08; *AKI* 14.5, 23.6.08; *Gulf Times* 16.5.08; *Deutsche Presse Agentur* 6.6.08; *Time Magazine* 6.5.08; *IslamOnline* 24.5, 7.7.08; *Independent* 13, 22.4, 16.5.08; *Monsters and Critics* 1.7.08, *New Statesman* 22.5.08.

Some of these articles can be found on the website of the Internet Centre Against Racism in Europe ([www.icare.to](http://www.icare.to)) For more information and further updates on Italy the websites of the European Roma Rights Centre ([www.errc.org](http://www.errc.org)) and EveryOne Group for International Cooperation on Human Rights ([www.everyonegroup.com](http://www.everyonegroup.com)) are particularly invaluable.

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# France: death in police custody

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## **A death in police custody in south-east France is causing community concern.**

Behind a banner proclaiming 'police blunder, assassins', hundreds of people, a thousand perhaps (according to the organisers), took part in a largely silent demonstration (except when marching past the police station) on Sunday 11 May in the centre of the south-eastern city of Grasse (Alpes-Maritimes). The march was held in tribute to 22-year-old Abdelhakim Ajimi (aka Hakim) who died two days earlier, while or after being arrested in circumstances which have still not been officially ascertained.

According to the daily *Nice-Matin*, which published the first report on 10 May, an altercation grew out of the refusal of the young man's bank branch (at Crédit Agricole) to allow him to withdraw money. He got angry and the police, alerted by the bank manager, intervened. According to Dominique Vian, the Alpes-Maritimes Prefect, a violent struggle ensued, wounding two police officers, one of whom was hospitalised with a collarbone fracture. In the Prefect's press release, published only one day after the death of Hakim when his family and supporters were marching in Grasse in tribute to him, Dominique Vian defended the conduct of the officers carrying out the arrest, stating: 'Nothing that took place would lead me to question the actions of the police.'

Michel Henry, writing in *Libération* on 12 May, reports that Hakim's support committee explained that the young man was unemployed and angry at not being able to receive unemployment payments for two months. When his efforts to withdraw money were refused, he exploded in anger, prompting the bank's director to summon the police (BAC- Brigade anti-criminalité).

According to Mr Vian's press release, the police quickly located the young man on the Boulevard Victor-Hugo, attempted to arrest him and when he again flew into a rage, a shop window was broken, and a policeman was wounded. Then, according to the Prefect, Hakim was finally controlled and handcuffed.

## **Challenge to police version of events**

Several witnesses, however, challenged the police report on the death, stating that it was after he was handcuffed that things got out of hand. Corroborating testimony from a secondary school student, 17-year-old Layla Picout, and a 30-year-old dog handler, Ludovic Gérard, indicates that at the very least the attitude of the three policemen to Abdelhakim Ajimi alarmed the witnesses and appeared violent and disproportionate. According to Gérard, interviewed by *Dimanche Nice-Matin*: 'His face was against the ground, three policemen were on top of him. He was handcuffed under his body. Pressure was applied to his spine. I heard the young man say he could not breathe. He was purple. One of the three policemen hit him with his fists.' Ludovic Gérard, talked about 'the lawful beating' on France Info radio. Speaking to *Libération*, he said: 'A policeman was exerting pressure on his vertebral column with his knee. Another was stifling him with his arm. He had his handcuffed hands under his torso. He was purple and begging to breathe. He got two punches instead, two good ones. I told the policemen: "You have him under control now, what more are you looking for?"' Another witness, Layla Picout, who knew Hakim, recounted the same story: 'He was defenceless, pinned to the ground, completely overturned, lying stone cold as though he was already gone. He looked all soft, like a marshmallow, when he was hauled, handcuffed, into the back of their car.' She told *Dimanche Nice-Matin* that 'one of the policemen was holding him by the throat. During the twenty minutes that I was there,' she said, 'he did not let go of his throat. He gripped him very tightly. That image will never leave my mind.' When the rescue services (firefighters) arrived, she said, several witnesses were shocked that the police had not let the firefighters take him to hospital. The injured policeman was taken to hospital but Hakim was transferred to the police station. Rescue services were summoned later to the police station and attempted to resuscitate Hakim, who, according to the Prefect, had fallen ill while in the police vehicle. At 4.30pm, Abdelhakim Ajimi was declared dead.

The autopsy findings on the 22-year-old were 'inconclusive' except to exclude actual blows as a cause of death. Analyses of the heart and lungs of the victim and toxicological examinations showed possible signs of asphyxiation or a possible heart condition. A judicial inquiry for involuntary manslaughter was opened by the prosecutor's office in Grasse to shed light on the causes and circumstances of Hakim's death. The autopsy

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revealed 'possible signs of asphyxiation' and one of the policemen involved in the arrest admitted that he practised a 'half-nelson strangulation hold'.

### ***Echoes of previous death***

This arrest technique is banned in some countries and France was condemned by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in October 2007, for a case which occurred in Toulon in November 1998, involving the death of Mohamed Saoud, a schizophrenic who had a violent crisis, striking out at his family. Three police officers were attacked or wounded in trying to control him. Finally, he was overcome by the police, his hands and ankles were handcuffed and he was placed on the floor on his belly, in a position similar to Hakim's. One policeman applied pressure to his shoulders and kidneys, another held his feet, and the third, his head. After being held for half an hour in this position, he died of cardiac arrest following slow asphyxiation, similar to what the witnesses described had happened to Hakim. Michel Henry, writing in *Libé Aix-Marseille* (21 May 2008), reports that, according to the ECHR, Mohamed Saoud's death occurred while he was held on the ground for over thirty minutes and handcuffed, struggling to breathe. During this time, the rescue services attended to the policemen. As a result of this 'failure of the obligation of the state to positively protect the life of Mohamed Saoud', France was ordered to pay a fine of 20,000 euros to the victim's relatives. The ECHR 'deplored the fact that no specific directive was issued by the French authorities with respect to this type of immobilisation technique'.

Hakim's death raises fresh questions over whether control and restraint techniques are being properly administered. In the view of the family lawyer, Franck de Vita, 'the indication that there are signs of asphyxiation testify to an unnatural death and hence wrongdoing of at least one of the policemen during the arrest'. Another lawyer for the young man's family, Sylvain Pont, when asked about the new elements that have been brought out, stated: 'I am not here to put the police or police agents on trial. However, if it is proved, in the light of evidence and the autopsy, that the police officer in question would have had the possibility of arresting this individual without endangering his life, the judges should then consider whether a reclassification from manslaughter to assault causing death without intent is timely, placing the matter within the jurisdiction of the court of appeal.'

### ***Unanswered questions***

**Questions remain:** Where did the death happen - during the arrest, while being transported to the police station or on arrival there? On the day of the demonstration in support of the young man's family and neighbours, Dominique Vian provided specific details which presented the young man as a cannabis smoker, prosecuted for having driven while intoxicated, even that he had been confined on occasions to a psychiatric hospital. Why, if it was known that Hakim had been in psychiatric care, was he not taken to hospital, but driven instead to the police station? Did the police in Grasse use a controversial immobilising technique against Hakim during his arrest? Several witnesses have raised questions over the actions taken by the police who continued, according to them, to apply pressure on the back and the neck of the young man while handcuffed, face to the ground, when he clearly could not breathe.

At the demonstration on 11 May, banners proclaimed: 'Hakim, we love you', 'Those who keep the peace kill our children', 'Police delinquency, where is the justice?' MRAP and the League of Human Rights expressed support.

According to Marc Désert, the prosecutor for the Republic in Grasse: 'The arrest was justified. The questioning techniques were justified. Techniques of this sort are taught for use in similar circumstances. Were they mastered? It is all a matter of balance and extent. Once the person is handcuffed, should a stranglehold be maintained until the arrival of reinforcements? That is the question that the investigation magistrate must determine.' He added: 'But if these techniques are judged to be dangerous, the police perhaps should review what they teach.'

So much community concern has been voiced that the public prosecutor's office in Tunis has decided to open an investigation of its own. On 13 May 2008, the police union, Unsa-police, issued a press release, which, while justifying 'police regulations' called for 'full light to be shed' on the circumstances of the arrest. It also called for the Ministry of the Interior to reinforce security on the spot as a 'precautionary measure'.

### ***Questions still unanswered***

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One month later on 7 June 2008, several hundred people marched again in Grasse, *Agence France Presse* reports, calling for answers to the same questions, still not revealed, over the precise circumstances of Abdelhakim Ajimi's death that took place during the time of his arrest.

'We want to see justice done, clearly and fairly', Briki Dorsaf, spokeswoman for the Abdelhakim Ajimi support committee, stated. She told *AFP* that they were returning to march in order to express their incomprehension that no police officer had been sent to prison.

The placards, brandishing pictures of Hakim, called for 'the same justice for everyone' and the protesters marched silently into the centre of town. MRAP and FTCT (la Fédération des Tunisiens pour une Citoyenneté des deux Rives), the Federation of Tunisians for Citizenship on Two Shores, lent their support to the protest. Despite the existence of 16 witnesses, the investigation into the death, nearly one month after the fact, has made no progress, according to MRAP. There is grave concern that the arrest procedure and the lack of answers so far has trivialised the use of violence against Hakim while in police custody.

**This report was compiled from articles 10-21 May 2008 in *Le Monde, Libération, Nouvel Observateur, Le Figaro Magazine, Afrik.com, LDH-Toulon, Nice-Matin, Dimanche Nice-Matin* and *Libé Aix-Marseille*; also 7-29 June 2008 from *AFP* and *MRAP*.**





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***The IRR European Race Bulletin is edited by Liz Fekete and compiled with the help of:***  
Harmit Athwal, Jenny Bourne, Norberto Laguía Casaus, Tim Cleary, Rhona Desmond, Mutlu Ergün,  
Imogen Forster, Margaret Goff, Sofia Hamaz, Kate Harre, Trevor Hemmings, Lotta Holmberg, Vincent  
Homolka, Terese Jonsson, Simon Katzenellenbogen, Mieke Kundnani, Virginia MacFadyen, Valentina  
Migliarini, Nicole Schmiedefeld, Karen Toma, Frances Webber and Chris Woodall.

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## **Institute of Race Relations**

2-6 Leeke Street  
London  
WC1X 9HS

Tel: 020 7837 0041  
Fax: 020 7278 0623

Email: [info@irr.org.uk](mailto:info@irr.org.uk)  
Web: [www.irr.org.uk](http://www.irr.org.uk)

