

**Chargé d’Affaires Brian C. Aggeler**

**Remarks at International Steering Committee Meeting**

**Of the Decade of Roma Inclusion**

**June 26, 2012 – 12:30 p.m.**

**Government Building, Skopje**

Good afternoon. Earlier this year, in announcing the United States’ intention to participate in the “Decade” as an observer, Secretary of State Clinton said in Sofia: “For too long, Roma citizens have been marginalized and isolated, prevented from contributing their talents and participating in their societies. This is a critical matter of human rights, and it affects millions of men, women, and children across the continent.” The Secretary reaffirmed that helping to promote and protect the inalienable human rights of Roma individuals everywhere is both her long-standing personal commitment, and a priority for the Obama Administration.

The United States is home to perhaps a million Roma who, like other members of different racial and ethnic minorities, have experienced discrimination and roadblocks to their full participation in society and enjoyment of equal rights. Though challenges still remain, the United States has witnessed considerable progress in respect for the human rights of those who have been marginalized. This includes women, members of diverse ethnic, racial, and religious minority groups and, more recently, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons. Here in Europe members of Roma communities have also been demanding - and deserve - legal and social equality. The cost of discrimination is very high both morally and economically; as Vaclav Havel famously put it, the treatment of the Roma is “a litmus test not of democracy but of a civil society.”

The European project that began in the wake of two destructive and fratricidal wars today stands as a sign of hope and progress, especially in terms of protecting and promoting democracy and human rights. It is time to complete that work and end the marginalization suffered by members of Roma communities.

We in the U.S. government work toward that goal in several ways. In the past three years, the State Department has invested more than two million dollars in programs designed to improve the lives of Roma in Europe. We are supporting a program to provide legal services and public legal education in Bulgaria, Romania, Serbia, and Macedonia, as well as training for NGO leaders to improve their effectiveness in engaging in local, national, and regional advocacy. Other programs focus on youth civic engagement and promoting interethnic dialogue in Hungary, Slovakia, Romania and Moldova.

The U.S. Agency for International Development meanwhile has invested more than eight million dollars in assistance to improve the status of Romani communities in the Western Balkans. USAID has supported, for example, scholarships, tutoring, and mentoring to Roma NGOs and students in Macedonia, the relocation of a Roma community from a lead-poisoned camp in northern Kosovo, Romani women's inclusion in a network of Serbian business women, and microcredit to Roma entrepreneurs in Albania.

Our embassies also engage in outreach to Roma communities and the public at large. We host events commemorating International Roma Day, embassy roundtables, film screenings, and concerts. Additionally we bring Romani individuals from across Europe to visit and study in the United States through our International Visitor Leadership Programs.

We hope that more countries will participate in the Decade, as members or observers, and reinforce with us the core mission of eliminating discrimination and closing the unacceptable gaps between Roma and the rest of society. We welcome Kosovo's request to join the Decade and encourage all member states to accept Kosovo's membership. Kosovo's desire to join the Decade shows its commitment to continuing to develop its multiethnic democracy, and its inclusion in the Decade would provide more opportunities for the thousands of Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians living in Kosovo to advance economically, socially, and politically. It would also support Kosovo's continued regional integration, a key to strengthening regional stability.

As a nation, the United States has learned the terrible cost that discrimination and exclusion can impose on a society. Only through respect for the human

rights and dignity of every individual, regardless of ethnicity, race, religion, national origin, or other differences, can we achieve the security, economic prosperity, and cultural richness that stems from embracing diversity.

Now that the United States has become an observer to the Decade of Roma Inclusion, we look forward to participating in the Decade's meetings and events, and we will use this venue to engage governments, NGOs, and Romani civil society on these important human rights issues. We will, as Secretary Clinton said, stand with you as a partner.