

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL FEATURE

Czech Republic: “Maybe this is what it was like during Hitler’s era”

When Romani children in the city of České Budějovice, in southern Czech Republic, wake up scared in the middle of the night, it is not for fear of imaginary monsters.

Angry mobs have been increasingly attacking their homes and harassing Roma communities across the country.

The first demonstration in České Budějovice took place on 29 June last year. More than 1,000 members of far-right groups gathered in the centre of town and marched to the Máj neighbourhood, chanting abuse against the Roma people living there.

They shouted “black swine” and “let’s get them” while throwing stun grenades and glass bottles at their homes and even at police officers trying to stop them.

“It was horrible. We were very much afraid... We were looking out of the windows and they were shouting at us, calling us ‘black swines’ and threatening to kill us,” said Michal, a 27-year old Romani resident.

“I thought, maybe this is what it was like during Hitler’s era.”

Most Roma residents watched helplessly from their windows at the violent demonstrations, completely terrified and hoping for the mob to leave.

But they didn’t.

In fact, they came back almost every Saturday for several weeks after that.

One of the largest marches took place on 6 July. The mob arrived as parents were playing with their children in the local playground.

“My sister was on her balcony overlooking the playground and she started to shout: ‘Run back home, they are here again!’. We took the children and started to run. They could not understand, they were crying and asking what was happening,” said Martina, one of the residents.

Once again, they chanted abuse, threw stones at the homes and threatened residents.

Protests eventually stopped in October but residents are still scared as rumours say new demonstrations might take place now that the winter is over.

Angela, who moved to Máj from Slovakia 25 years ago, said life has become almost unbearable in the area, with mothers and children afraid to go out because of the marches. They say discrimination, even from public officials, has increased since the demonstrations.

“After the demonstration I was stressed and afraid. The children were worried. They asked me not to go to work, but it is important for me to have money for my family,” she said.

After the first march, in June, some measures were taken by the police to protect the targeted Roma communities. However, the central government has been slow to unequivocally condemn racist marches taking place in České Budějovice and elsewhere in the Czech Republic.