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Slovakia to Investigate Charges Gypsy Women Were Sterilized

By PETER S. GREEN

PRAGUE, March 5 — Slovakia's Interior Ministry has announced that it will send a special team of investigators, headed by a woman, to look into claims that Gypsy women in eastern Slovakia have been sterilized against their will.

In January, two nongovernmental organizations issued a report alleging that at least 110 Gypsy women had been sterilized without their consent since the fall of Communism in 1989. Local doctors and regional officials denied that the practice was continuing, and newspaper columns and television newscasts attacked the authors of the report, the New York-based Center for Reproductive Rights and the Center for Civil and Human Rights, based in the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

"Given the sensitivity of the issue, the headquarters of the team was established in Zilina, Central Slovakia and it will be headed by a woman," a spokesman for the Interior Ministry, Boris Azaltovic, told Slovak reporters.

An initial investigation by the Health Ministry reported that the allegations appeared unfounded, but the new announcement suggests the government is worried that the treatment of its large Gypsy minority — an estimated 10 percent of Slovakia's 5.4 million people are Gypsies — could become a bone of contention in final talks before Slovakia joins the European Union next year.

Sterilizing Gypsies was government policy during Slovakia's World War II collaboration with Nazi Germany. During the 42 years of Communist rule, the authorities paid Gypsy women sums far above annual salary expectations to be sterilized.

Police are now investigating cases of sterilization of Gypsy women since 1999 for evidence that alleged forced sterilizations could constitute a crime.

The charges were brought by a government advocate for minority rights, Jana Kviecinska, and two Gypsy women.

Many Gypsy women contend that they were coerced into signing consent forms or even blank sheets of paper while in the hospital to deliver babies. Some say they did not know what they were signing. Others are illiterate and could not have read the papers to which their signatures are affixed.

In general, Slovakia's Gypsies are among the poorest people in a country that is still struggling economically after the collapse of Communism, and they are often the object of verbal abuse and other discrimination. Many Gypsies live in shantytowns on the outskirts of Slovak cities.

Often, Gypsy women have half a dozen children by their late 20's.

Contributing to the controversy over the sterilization allegations is a fear fueled by tabloid speculation and populist politicians that the high birth rate of the mainly darker-skinned Gypsies will leave ethnic Slovaks outnumbered by 2060.

Before today's promise of a government inquiry, Slovakia's deputy prime minister for minority rights, Pal Csaky, had threatened to file charges against the organizations that first reported the sterilization allegations. If the allegations were false, he said, they would be prosecuted for spreading false rumors and damaging the country's good name. If they were true, he said, the authors would be prosecuted for not taking their evidence directly to the police.