Court Hears Claim Of Forced Sterilization

(AP) — Europe's human rights court has opened a hearing into a Gypsy woman's allegation that she was wrongly and forcibly sterilized at a state-run hospital in her native Slovakia because of her ethnicity. The case at the European Court of Human Rights centers on allegations that a semi-official policy of forced sterilization of Gypsies — who prefer to be called Roma — in eastern Europe during the Communist era lingered in some areas after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

Other similar cases are pending before the European Court, but this is the first to advance to the hearing stage, said Tracey Turner-Tretz, a court spokeswoman. The complaint brought by the woman against Slovakia's government centers on the claim that she was sterilized through tubal ligation after giving birth in 2000 to her second child by Caesarian section. She was identified only as "V.C." and said to be about 30 years old.

The woman alleges that in the final stages of labor, she was told by staffers at the Presov hospital in eastern Slovakia that if she wanted to have more children, either she or the baby would die, the court said in a statement Tuesday. Scared, in pain and confused about the meaning of sterilization, she signed a consent form for the procedure, the court said. "She also claims that her Roma ethnicity — clearly stated in her medical record — played a decisive role in her sterilization," the statement said, just as the closed-door hearing got under way.

"In particular," the statement went on, "she was placed in the so-called 'Gypsy room' and was not allowed to use the same bathrooms and toilets as non-Roma women." Hospital managers countered that the sterilization was conducted on medical grounds — amid the risk of a uterus rupture — and denied her claim that she was segregated away from non-Roma patients, the statement said. National courts and investigators in Slovakia did not turn up any wrongdoing by hospital personnel. A spokesman for the Slovak justice ministry didn't immediately respond to questions.

The woman "continues to suffer" today because of the operation, with feelings of ostracism from the Roma community, the statement said, and her husband has repeatedly left her because of her infertility. The hearing in the seven-judge chamber concluded Tuesday, and a verdict is not expected for several weeks. Either side could appeal the ruling — possibly sending the case up to the court's Grand Chamber. The head of a U.S. human rights watchdog called on Slovakia's government "to finally acknowledge cleraly and unequivocally that Romani women in Slovakia were, at one time, targeted for sterilization."

U.S. Rep. Christopher Smith, the chairman of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, said that "as a matter of justice for the victims and truth about the past due to all the

people of Slovakia, this practice should be condemned as a grave human rights violation." The Communist governments in Hungary and Czechoslovakia applied a semi-official policy of forced sterilization to limit the population of Gypsies, whose large families were seen as a burden on the state. The practice ended only in recent years, long after the fall of those regimes.

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