

In the case of Biondi v. Italy*,

The European Court of Human Rights, sitting, in accordance with Article 43 (art. 43) of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms ("the Convention")** and the relevant provisions of the Rules of Court, as a Chamber composed of the following judges:

Mr R. Ryssdal, President,
Mr Thór Vilhjálmsson,
Mr F. Matscher,
Mr L.-E. Pettiti,
Mr B. Walsh,
Mr C. Russo,
Mr A. Spielmann,
Mr N. Valticos,
Mr S.K. Martens,

and also of Mr M.-A. Eissen, Registrar, and Mr H. Petzold, Deputy Registrar,

Having deliberated in private on 28 October 1991 and 24 January 1992,

Delivers the following judgment, which was adopted on the last-mentioned date:

Notes by the Registrar

* The case is numbered 30/1991/282/353. The first number is the case's position on the list of cases referred to the Court in the relevant year (second number). The last two numbers indicate the case's position on the list of cases referred to the Court since its creation and on the list of the corresponding originating applications to the Commission.

** As amended by Article 11 of Protocol No. 8 (P8-11), which came into force on 1 January 1990.

PROCEDURE

1. The case was referred to the Court on 8 March 1991 by the European Commission of Human Rights ("the Commission"), within the three-month period laid down by Article 32 para. 1 and Article 47 (art. 32-1, art. 47) of the Convention. It originated in an application (no. 12871/87) against the Italian Republic lodged with the Commission under Article 25 (art. 25) by an Italian national, Mrs Ida Biondi, on 17 April 1987.

The Commission's request referred to Articles 44 and 48 (art. 44, art. 48) and to the declaration whereby Italy recognised the compulsory jurisdiction of the Court (Article 46) (art. 46). The object of the request was to obtain a decision as to whether the facts of the case disclosed a breach by the respondent State of its obligations under Article 6 para. 1 (art. 6-1).

2. In response to the enquiry made in accordance with Rule 33 para. 3 (d) of the Rules of Court, the applicant stated that she wished to take part in the proceedings and designated the lawyer who would represent her (Rule 30).

3. On 23 April 1991 the President of the Court decided that, pursuant to Rule 21 para. 6 and in the interests of the proper administration of justice, this case and the cases of Gilberti,

Nonnis, Trotto, Nibbio, Borgese, Macaluso, Monaco, Cattivera, Seri, Manunza, Gori, Casadio, Testa, Lestini, Covitti, Zonetti, Simonetti and Dal Sasso* should be heard by the same Chamber.

* Cases nos. 19/1991/271/342; 23/1991/275/346; 26/1991/278/349; 28/1991/280/351; 29/1991/281/352; 31/1991/283/354; 32/1991/284/355; 34/1991/286/357; 35/1991/287/358; 37/1991/289/360; 45/1991/297/368; 52/1991/304/375 to 57/1991/309/380; 60/1991/312/383

4. The Chamber to be constituted for this purpose included ex officio Mr C. Russo, the elected judge of Italian nationality (Article 43 of the Convention) (art. 43), and Mr R. Ryssdal, the President of the Court (Rule 21 para. 3 (b)). On the same day, in the presence of the Registrar, the President drew by lot the names of the other seven members, namely Mr Thór Vilhjálmsson, Mr F. Matscher, Mr J. Pinheiro Farinha, Mr L.-E. Pettiti, Mr B. Walsh, Mr N. Valticos and Mr S.K. Martens (Article 43 in fine of the Convention and Rule 21 para. 4) (art. 43).

Subsequently, Mr A. Spielmann, substitute judge, replaced Mr Pinheiro Farinha, who had resigned and whose successor at the Court had taken up his duties before the hearing (Rules 2 para. 3 and 22 para. 1).

5. Mr Ryssdal assumed the office of President of the Chamber (Rule 21 para. 5) and, through the Deputy Registrar, consulted the Agent of the Italian Government ("the Government"), the Delegate of the Commission and the applicant's lawyer on the organisation of the proceedings (Rules 37 para. 1 and 38). Pursuant to the order made in consequence, the Registrar received the Government's memorial on 17 July 1991 and the applicant's memorial on 25 July. By a letter received on 22 September, the Secretary to the Commission informed the Registrar that the Delegate would submit oral observations.

6. On 29 August the Commission had produced the file on the proceedings before it, as requested by the Registrar on the President's instructions.

7. In accordance with the decision of the President - who had given the applicant leave to use the Italian language (Rule 27 para. 3) -, the hearing took place in public in the Human Rights Building, Strasbourg, on 28 October 1991. The Court had held a preparatory meeting beforehand.

There appeared before the Court:

(a) for the Government

Mr G. Raimondi, magistrato, seconded to the Diplomatic Legal Service of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs,	Co-Agent,
Mr G. Manzo, magistrato, seconded to the Ministry of Justice,	
Mrs A. Passannanti, magistrato, seconded to the Ministry of Justice,	Counsel;

(b) for the Commission

Mr J.A. Frowein,	Delegate;
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(c) for the applicant

Mr G. Angelozzi, avvocato,	Counsel,
Mr M. de Stefano, avvocato,	Adviser.

The Court heard addresses by Mr Raimondi and Mr Manzo for the Government, by Mr Frowein for the Commission and by Mr Angelozzi and Mr de Stefano for the applicant, as well as their answers to its question.

8. On 14 October the Government had lodged their observations on the applicant's claims for just satisfaction (Article 50 of the Convention) (art. 50); on 5 November the Commission filed its observations on those claims.

AS TO THE FACTS

9. Mrs Ida Biondi is an Italian national and resides in Rome. She is a housewife. The facts established by the Commission pursuant to Article 31 para. 1 (art. 31-1) of the Convention are as follows (paragraphs 16-18 of its report):

"16. On 7 March 1986 the applicant brought proceedings against the Istituto Nazionale della Previdenza Sociale (INPS) before the Rome magistrate's court (pretore) in order to establish her right to a disability pension.

17. The investigation began at the hearing of 30 May 1986, when the magistrate's court called for a medical opinion and an expert was sworn in. At the close of the hearing of 3 October 1986, the magistrate's court dismissed the applicant's claim. The text of the decision was lodged with the registry the same day.

18. On 3 February 1987 the applicant appealed against the above decision and on 5 February 1987 the presiding judge of the Rome District Court fixed the hearing before the competent chamber for 21 February 1989.

19."

10. According to the information supplied to the European Court by the applicant, the District Court gave judgment on 10 October 1991, but the text of its decision has not yet been filed with the registry.

PROCEEDINGS BEFORE THE COMMISSION

11. Mrs Biondi lodged her application with the Commission on 17 April 1987. She complained of the length of the civil proceedings brought by her and relied on Article 6 para. 1 (art. 6-1) of the Convention.

12. On 11 May 1990 the Commission declared the application (no. 12871/87) admissible. In its report of 15 January 1991 (Article 31) (art. 31), it expressed the unanimous opinion that there had been a violation of Article 6 para. 1 (art. 6-1). The full text of the Commission's opinion is reproduced as an annex to this judgment*.

* Note by the Registrar: for practical reasons this annex will appear only with the printed version of the judgment (volume 228-C of Series A of the Publications of the Court), but a copy of the Commission's report is obtainable from the registry.

FINAL SUBMISSIONS TO THE COURT BY THE GOVERNMENT

13. At the hearing the Government confirmed the submission put forward in their memorial, in which they requested the Court to hold "that there [had] been no violation of the Convention in the present case".

AS TO THE LAW

I. ALLEGED VIOLATION OF ARTICLE 6 PARA. 1 (art. 6-1)

14. The applicant claimed that her civil action had not been tried within a "reasonable time" as required under Article 6 para. 1 (art. 6-1) of the Convention, according to which:

"In the determination of his civil rights and obligations ..., everyone is entitled to a ... hearing within a reasonable time by [a] ... tribunal ..."

The Government disputed this view, whereas the Commission accepted it.

15. The period to be taken into consideration began on 7 March 1986 when the proceedings were instituted against the INPS in the magistrate's court. It has not yet ended as Mrs Biondi's appeal is still pending in the appellate court.

16. The reasonableness of the length of proceedings is to be assessed with reference to the criteria laid down in the Court's case-law and in the light of the circumstances of the case, which in this instance call for an overall assessment.

17. The Government invoked the excessive workload of the relevant courts and the latter's duty in principle to deal with cases in the order in which they were registered. In addition, they referred to the complexity of the facts and the inaction of the applicant, who had never requested that the hearings be held at shorter intervals.

According to the applicant, the case was a simple one and her own conduct could have had only a negligible effect.

18. The Court stresses that special diligence is necessary in employment disputes, which include pensions disputes (see, *inter alia*, *mutatis mutandis*, the *Vocaturo v. Italy* judgment of 24 May 1991, Series A no. 206-C, p. 32, para. 17). Italy moreover acknowledged this by amending, in 1973, the special procedure laid down in this field and by introducing, in 1990, emergency measures intended to speed up the conduct of such proceedings.

The Government pleaded the backlog of cases in the relevant courts, but Article 6 para. 1 (art. 6-1) imposes on the Contracting States the duty to organise their legal systems in such a way that their courts can meet each of its requirements (see the same judgment, *ibid.*).

This case did not give rise to any complex question of fact or law. Moreover the proceedings were conducted at a normal pace in the magistrate's court and the State cannot be held responsible for the four months which elapsed between the decision of 3 October 1986 and the date on which the applicant appealed to the Rome District Court.

On the other hand, the appeal proceedings remained dormant for more than two years. On 5 February 1987 the President of the Rome District Court set down the first hearing before the competent chamber for 21 February 1989. Furthermore, two years and eight months went by before the District Court gave judgment, on 10 October 1991.

19. Accordingly and in view of what was at stake in the proceedings for Mrs Biondi, the Court cannot regard as "reasonable" in this instance a lapse of time already amounting to nearly six years.

There has therefore been a violation of Article 6 para. 1 (art. 6-1).

II. APPLICATION OF ARTICLE 50 (art. 50)

20. According to Article 50 (art. 50):

"If the Court finds that a decision or a measure taken by a legal authority or any other authority of a High Contracting Party is completely or partially in conflict with the obligations arising from the ... Convention, and if the internal law of the said Party allows only partial reparation to be made for the consequences of this decision or measure, the decision of the Court shall, if necessary, afford just satisfaction to the injured party."

A. Damage

21. The applicant claimed in the first place 8,000,000 Italian lire for damage.

In the Government's contention, she sustained no pecuniary damage; she had moreover secured an order that her disability pension be paid to her with effect from 1 May 1988. As to non-pecuniary damage, a finding of a violation would constitute sufficient just satisfaction.

22. There is no evidence that the violation found caused Mrs Biondi pecuniary damage. On the other hand, she must have suffered a degree of non-pecuniary damage for which the Court, making an assessment on an equitable basis, awards her 5,000,000 lire.

B. Costs and expenses

23. The applicant also sought 3,000,000 lire for costs and expenses incurred before the Convention organs.

Having regard to the evidence at its disposal and to its case-law in this field, the Court awards her 2,000,000 lire under this head.

C. Interest

24. Mrs Biondi requested finally that interest be paid on the sums awarded, at the statutory rate in force in her country and in respect of the period running from the delivery of the present judgment to the payment of such sums by the national authorities.

The Commission invited the Court to fix for the Government - who did not give their opinion - a compulsory time-limit for executing the judgment and to make provision for the payment of interest in the event of their failure to comply therewith.

25. The first of these proposals is in conformity with a practice followed by the Court since October 1991.

As to the second, the Court does not consider it appropriate to require any payment of interest in this instance.

FOR THESE REASONS, THE COURT UNANIMOUSLY

1. Holds that there has been a violation of Article 6 para. 1 (art. 6-1);

2. Holds that the respondent State is to pay to the applicant, within three months, 5,000,000 (five million) Italian lire for non-pecuniary damage and 2,000,000 (two million) lire for costs and

expenses;

3. Dismisses the remainder of the claim for just satisfaction.

Done in English and in French, and delivered at a public hearing in the Human Rights Building, Strasbourg, on 26 February 1992.

Signed: Rolv RYSSDAL
President

Signed: Marc-André EISSEN
Registrar