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Bulgaria: Disabled women condemned to 'slow death'

It is a sad irony that on World Mental Health day disabled women in Sanadinovo Home, a Bulgarian institution, continue to be condemned to a 'slow death', Amnesty International said today.

On 1 October 2001 representatives from Amnesty International, Bulgarian Helsinki Committee and Mental Disability Rights International visited a state institution for mentally disabled women in the village of Sanadinovo, Bulgaria. The delegation found that the material conditions and the lack of appropriate care for the most disabled women amounted to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

"The conditions in the Sanadinovo Home for Mentally Disabled Women in Bulgaria are far worse than any documented anywhere else in the region, this is a 'slow death'!" stated a representative of Mental Disability Rights International.

Around 20 women, some of whom also suffer from mental illness, are housed in a two-room single storey building. This single storey building, with a small paved yard on two of its sides, is separated by a high wire fence from the grounds from the rest of the facility. The gate is kept locked.

At the time of the visit most of the women were sitting on the ground in the yard as there were no chairs or benches. They were wearing dirty, ill-fitting, tattered clothes and at least one woman was not wearing any underclothes.

Several women with amputated limbs or other physical disabilities apparently had no recourse to any mechanical or prosthetic devices. One of the physically disabled women was in an old wheel-chair but it was unclear if this was for her personal use or served others, as well. No one exhibited aggressive behaviour although some appeared as if they were experiencing distress and/or discomfort.

"The conditions in which the women of Sanadinovo are forced to live are inhuman. The beds of two women who had stayed in the rooms were heavily soiled. The floors of the rooms were wet and there was an overpowering smell of urine and faeces even though all the barred windows and doors had been open. There were faeces on the floor, particularly under the beds, and traces of faeces all over the walls," said Ivan Fšer, Amnesty International's researcher on Bulgaria who visited Sanadinovo.

The delegation documented that the toilet facilities consist of two fully exposed squat toilets and a water faucet, adjacent to the room in which patients live. There is no separate space dedicated to day-time activities.

"It is unimaginable to think what this facility is like in colder weather, particularly in winter, when all doors would be closed," Mr Fšer added. "Whether there is sufficient heating is another matter which could not be ascertained."

Furthermore, the Sanadinovo institution, caring for 97 women, is staffed by only four nurses and five orderlies who work in shifts. At night, only one nurse and an orderly are on duty.

"It is impossible for such a small staff to care for this number of women, particularly those who are most seriously disabled," Mr Fšer stated.

Women who 'misbehave' are held in a cage made with two brick walls and iron bars and wire on the remaining two sides. When the delegation visited Sanadinovo six women were being held in this three by one and a half metres space. They appeared calm and non-aggressive but also looked withdrawn and vacant.

The cage was full of urine and faeces and the women covered in filth. One woman was unclothed on the lower half of her body and many sores were visible on her skin. It was not possible to establish how long anyone would be subjected to this form of seclusion as no records of this appear to be maintained. There was no apparent staff supervision of these women, and the delegation saw another patient bringing them water in a plastic bottle to drink through the bars.

"These women are being held in conditions that contravene their rights to be treated with dignity and to protection for their physical and mental integrity. The institutions should be closed and the women of Sanadinovo moved to an adequate facility," Mr Fšer said.

"Those who are responsible for such gross neglect in the treatment and care of the women held in Sanadinovo must be held accountable."

Background:

Most of the women of Sanadinovo had been brought to this state institution as orphans or they were committed when their parents or relatives could no longer care for them. They are a legacy of an unreformed mental disability care system in which hardly any support is provided to the parents and the doctors reportedly encourage that such children or adults be committed into state-run institutions.

Article 7 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms strictly prohibit anyone being subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Furthermore, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Mentally Retarded Persons proclaims that "the mentally retarded person has a right to protection from exploitation, abuse and degrading treatment" (paragraph 6).

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