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Bulgaria: People with mental disabilities hidden far from the eyes of society

(Sofia) Despite improvements in some institutions, people with mental disabilities in Bulgaria are left to languish in shocking conditions, not fit for human beings, stated Irene Khan, Amnesty International's Secretary General.

Launching a new report, *Bulgaria: Far from the eyes of society. Systematic discrimination against people with mental disabilities* on International Mental Health Day, Irene Khan said : "Most strikingly, care for people with mental disabilities in Bulgaria is marked by a systematic lack of assessment, treatment and rehabilitation by therapists, psychologists and physicians."

"Improving the appalling situation for the men, women and children in social care homes may be a matter of life or death for some of them," said Ms Khan.

"In terms of material and moral conditions of detention in psychiatric institutions in Bulgaria, these are the worst of all the places of involuntary confinement that we have ever seen in this country. No prison in Bulgaria is as bad as the best adult social care home," stated Krassimir Kanev, director of the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee.

Children continue to be placed in social care homes on the basis of inadequate diagnoses and without the prospect of monitoring or reassessment. Although the material conditions in some institutions may have significantly improved, children in these homes continue to be deprived of adequate medical care and appropriate rehabilitation. Those with the most severe disabilities may be left all day in their beds, without toys, organized activities or visual stimulation. When these children reach adulthood, Amnesty International found that they were completely unable to communicate with others or to do anything independently. They are institutionalized for life.

"Unless active and appropriate treatment is started soon, these children risk being permanently and severely affected, condemned to spend the rest of their lives in social care homes," stated Ms Khan.

The physical conditions in social care homes for adults are often cruel, inhuman and degrading. Many people with mental disabilities are housed in derelict buildings, which are often filthy with faeces on the walls, bedding and floors.

According to the report, the high numbers of deaths -- including from pneumonia, hypothermia and malnutrition -- testify to medical neglect and a lack of food and warmth in many Bulgarian institutions.

"While the Bulgarian government has attempted to make improvements in certain homes, what is needed is a comprehensive reform of its mental health care and social assistance services," said Ms Khan. "The international community should provide the support to actually implement the program."

As the onset of winter approaches, Ms Khan urged the Bulgarian government to take urgent measures and appealed to all people concerned with this issue to join forces with Amnesty International as the campaign to protect the rights of people with mental disabilities begins.

"We begin our campaign to protect the rights of the people confined in state mental health or social care institutions; to ensure that their basic human rights are respected without discrimination; to ensure that they can lead their lives with human dignity, develop their full potentials and are fully integrated into the community," stated Ms Khan.

Background:

Amnesty International's report "*Bulgaria: Far from the eyes of society. Systematic discrimination against people with mental disabilities*" focuses on the violations of the basic rights of people subjected to treatment against their will in psychiatric hospitals, or when placed for residential care in social care homes for children or adults with mental disabilities.

The report, was launched at the International Forum on Discrimination of People with Mental Disabilities, jointly organized by Amnesty International and the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee. It concludes that people with mental disabilities are victims of systematic discrimination, arising from legal regulations and procedures which are not in line with international standards or from practices such as seclusion, or lack of rehabilitation.

Amnesty International has for many years campaigned to end conditions of imprisonment and confinement of political and other prisoners that amounted to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. This report focuses on the violations of the civil and political rights of people with mental disabilities that result from inadequate legislation and appalling living conditions, lack of medical treatment and rehabilitation therapies, the inappropriate use of restraint and seclusion, and failure to address complaints of ill-treatment.

Amnesty International has produced a 20-minute documentary with a 5-minute B-roll illustrating this issue. For more information or accreditation to the Forum, please contact:

Amnesty International -- Judit Arenas on + 44 7778 472 188. She can also arrange interviews with Irene Khan and provide advance copies of the report or the video.

Bulgarian Helsinki Committee -- Desislava Simeonova on + 35 92 943 4876 or +35 92 944 0670.

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