

Mentally disabled women are being held at a state institution in the village of Sanadinovo in conditions that a delegation of mental health experts has described as "far worse than we have documented anywhere in the region," and which amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment. Some inmates are being held in a cage, because the staff claim that "they had misbehaved". Independent experts have described conditions in such institutions as "a slow death".

The Sanadinovo Social Home for Mentally Disabled Women houses 97 women. A delegation from the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, Mental Disability Rights International (MDRI) and Amnesty International visited the institution on 1 October. They found around 20 of the most severely disabled women are being housed in a two-room, single-storey building, separated from the rest of the facility by a high wire fence. Some of these women also suffer from mental illness.

The delegation found most of the 20 women sitting on the ground in the small, paved yard outside the building. There were no chairs or benches. They wore dirty, ill-fitting, tattered clothes. Several women with amputated limbs or other physical disabilities moved about without any help from the staff. Only one of the physically disabled women was in an old wheel-chair, but it was not clear whether she had to share it with others.

It appears that during milder, warm weather these women spend most of the day outside the building in the small yard. Once the delegation inspected the building it was clear why: the conditions inside were appallingly filthy, smelly and unhygienic. 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.

Not far from the small building is a cage measuring roughly three metres by one and a half (10 feet by 5 feet), with two brick walls and two made of iron bars and wire. At the time of the visit six women were held in this cage. The director of the home later explained that staff lock patients in the cage when they are "violent and destructive, as we do not have adequate drugs to administer to the patients in such situations". The cage was full of urine and faeces and the women covered in filth. One was naked from the waist down, and many sores were visible on her skin. It was not clear how long anyone would be held in the cage. There appeared to be no staff supervision of these women and at one point we observed another patient bring a plastic bottle of water which she then held between the bars for a woman on the other side to drink.

The Sanadinovo institution is staffed by four nurses and five orderlies who work in shifts. At night only one nurse and an orderly are on duty. They cannot possibly adequately care for so many women, particularly the most seriously disabled who are held in the small building.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Most of the women of Sanadinovo were brought to this state institution as orphans or were committed here when their parents or relatives could no longer care for them. They are a legacy of a mental disability care system which provides hardly any support to parents, and where doctors reportedly encourage that such children or adults be committed to state-run institutions. These are usually located in the remotest areas of the country, outside small villages, or in the mountains, far from medical facilities, and from the trained people who could be hired to work at them.

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). World Mental Health Day is 10 October.

For more details see press release *Bulgaria: Disabled women condemned to slow death* [AI Index: EUR 15/002/2001] published on 10 October 2001.

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Please send appeals to arrive as quickly as possible, in English, French, Russian, German or your own language:

- expressing concern that the conditions in which the 20 segregated women are being held, and the use of the cage for seclusion, amount to cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment;
- urging the authorities to take immediate steps to ensure that the women of Sanadinovo are treated in a professional and humane way, consistent with international standards;
- urging the authorities to immediately end the use of cages as a seclusion method at the Sanadinovo institution;
- pointing out that the government should close the institution permanently and move the patients to an adequate facility, or else take immediate action to bring it into line with international standards;
- asking them to ensure that all similar institutions are adequately staffed and equipped, and subjected to a system of comprehensive monitoring by municipal and national authorities, including independent bodies;
- asking them to investigate the situation in Sanadinovo fully and impartially, and bring to justice anyone found responsible for gross neglect in the treatment and care of the women committed to this institution.

APPEALS TO:

Prime Minister

Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha

Prime Minister (*Premier*)

Council of Ministers

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Salutation: Dear Prime Minister

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Salutation: Dear General Prosecutor

Min. of Labour & Social Policy

Lidiya Shuleva

Minister of Labour & Social Policy

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Salutation: Dear Minister

Minister of Health

Bozhidar Finkov

Minister of Health

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Salutation: Dear Minister

COPIES TO:

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Salutation: Dear President

and to diplomatic representatives of Bulgaria accredited to your country.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY. Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 20 November 2001.