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Bulgaria: Government Should Prevent Further Deaths in Children's Homes

As the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture publishes its report today, Amnesty International calls on the President of Bulgaria to take immediate steps to prevent further deaths of children and young people at the Home for Mentally Handicapped Children in Dzhurkovo, Luki municipality.

Seven inhabitants died from malnutrition and hypothermia while they were wards in the home between 31 January and 27 February 1997, according to reports received by Amnesty International. Nine-year-old Angelina Atanasova, who died on 25 February, weighed only seven kilograms, while 18-year-old Diana Dechkova, who died two days later, weighed 11 kilograms.

“That these children have suffered such extreme neglect is totally unacceptable and constitutes severe cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment,” Amnesty International said.

“The government should take immediate steps to prevent further deaths by initiating a prompt and independent inquiry into conditions at the home and ensure that the basic requirements for food, clothing and heating are provided.”

There are currently 81 children in this state-run institution. It does not have a qualified physician on the staff, nor is there a physician working in the vicinity. Roughly 20 per cent of the children are bed-ridden or otherwise immobilized, and are most severely exposed to the cold.

Since the beginning of the year there have been no proper food deliveries and the central heating has not been functioning because of lack of funds. This is particularly alarming since the institution is located at 1,300 metres above sea level. The director of the home and the Mayor of Luki have repeatedly asked for assistance from the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs but have only recently received a sum of 500,000 leva (approximately, US \$2,500). It is not known whether an inquiry into the seven deaths in Dzhurkovo is under way or whether the competent authorities have taken any measures to prevent further deaths.

Amnesty International has received reports that the situation in other institutions caring for orphans and children with mental and other disabilities is also very serious, although not as grave as in Dzhurkovo. These reports indicate that serious neglect continues in the institutions, which have been grossly underfunded in the past.

“We are aware that the present social and economic situation in Bulgaria is grave. However, the circumstances surrounding these deaths indicate that the government is failing to meet its obligation under international human rights standards to prevent such appalling treatment of those in care,” Amnesty International said.

The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture condemned Bulgaria for cases of police torture and “atrocious conditions” in its psychiatric hospitals. Amnesty International welcomes the publication of this report which fully confirms its findings published in June 1996. This makes the implementation of the extensive recommendations made by the organization in its report more urgent.

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