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Peru: Poorest women and children are let down by discriminatory health services

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(Lima) In a new report published today, Amnesty International revealed that in Peru, discriminatory maternity and infant health services are letting hundreds of impoverished women and children die every year and denying many of them the right to an identity.

“Effective maternity and infant health care in Peru seems to be a privilege of the rich. Impoverished women who are at greater risk of health problems during pregnancy and birth, and marginalized children who face higher risks of illnesses during the first years of life are the ones who receive the least protection,” said Guadalupe Marengo, Amnesty International’s Americas Deputy Director.

Amnesty International’s report also revealed that despite the development of a governmental free health service for marginalized communities, effective health care is not reaching impoverished women and children.

“Lack of proper investment and unequal distribution of health resources across Peru is resulting in the deaths of hundreds of women and children every year, deaths that could have been easily prevented,” said Guadalupe Marengo.

According to official statistics, during 2000 alone, 71 out of every 1,000 babies died at birth in Huancavelica, one of Peru’s poorest department -- almost five times more than in Lima, Peru’s richest city, where 17 out of every 1,000 babies died on the same year.

The World Health Organization estimated that 410 out of every 100,000 women died during labour in Peru in 2004. This figure is surpassed only by Haiti, Guatemala and Bolivia -- the three poorest countries in the Americas.

Amnesty International’s report, published in the context of the III National Health Conference, also points out the discrimination suffered by the few who access health services.

“If you go [to the health centre] badly dressed they make you wait longer and the ones who arrive later but better dressed go first ...if you complain, they treat you worse,” said a woman from the town of Iquitos,

Amazon region.

In other areas of the country, indigenous women who decided or were not able to go to health centres to give birth were fined and denied birth certificates.

Fidencio, a farmer from Huanuco, central-east Peru, was asked to pay US\$30 at his local health centre as a fine for allowing his son to be born at home. Fidencio would have to sell around 1,000 kilos of potatoes to raise the money. As he failed to pay the fine, the local health centre has denied him a birth certificate for his baby – who consequently doesn't have an identity.

In its final report, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission said that one of the main causes of the 20 year long internal armed conflict in the country was the discrimination and lack of access to economic, social and cultural rights for the poor -- particularly women and indigenous peoples.

"Discrimination against marginalised women and children is a long-standing problem in Peru. The new government has the chance to change the situation by setting the country's priorities right: they must guarantee human rights for all without discrimination," said Guadalupe Marengo.

Amnesty International called on the new Peruvian authorities to:

- Ensure non-discrimination and distribution of information regarding the free maternity and infant health service available for socially excluded people;
- Guarantee that marginalised women are not fined for giving birth at home;
- Ensure that all children have access to birth certificates; and to
- Guarantee adequate labour conditions and human rights training for health professionals.

For a copy of Amnesty International's report "Peru: Poor and excluded women – denial of maternal and infant health", please see: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/ESLAMR460042006>
For media materials please see: <http://news.amnesty.org/>

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