

PUBLIC

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Denial of medical care/health concern

20 February 2004

ROMANIA

**Patients at the Poiana Mare psychiatric hospital**

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Seventeen patients at a psychiatric hospital in southern Romania have reportedly died of malnutrition and hypothermia since the start of this year, and the remaining 440 patients are in grave danger unless the Romanian government immediately provide the hospital with adequate food, heating fuel and medication.

A representative of the *Centrul de Resurse Juridice* (Centre for Legal Resources), a Romanian non-governmental organization, visited the hospital on 20 February and established that 17 patients had died in 2004, apparently from malnutrition and hypothermia, and that 84 patients had died, many from similar causes, in 2003. Some hospital staff expressed concern about the lack of funds to adequately care for the patients, who were hungry, poorly clothed, infested with lice and had inadequate bedding. The heating system does not appear to be used at the hospital, a former army barracks, in a region where temperatures frequently fall below freezing for days, sometimes weeks at a time between November and March.

The hospital is in the town of Poiana Mare, 80km south of Craiova. The mayor of the town told the national daily newspaper *Evenimentul zilei* on 17 February, "Since the beginning of the year I have issued 21 death certificates [this number includes four patients from another near-by hospital for chest diseases]. I found out that these people died of hunger and cold... People live there in miserable conditions, a situation confirmed by the Dolj County Sanitary Inspectorate. I have not witnessed something like this for a long time – so many deaths in such a short period of time."

#### **BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

The situation in the Poiana Mare hospital has been under public scrutiny for many years. Under the Ceaușescu regime in the 1970s and 1980s it had been notorious as one of the hospitals where dissidents were arbitrarily detained. After 1989 the deplorable living conditions and lack of adequate treatment came to symbolize the plight of thousands of people with mental illness held in similar institutions throughout the country. The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CPT) visited the hospital in 1995 and 1999. The Romanian Ministry of Health told the CPT in November 1995 that "The Poiana Mare Hospital shall be gradually eliminated as a hospital, as it no longer brings together acceptable circumstances...". Very little appears to have changed since then.

Amnesty International, in cooperation with the Centre for Legal Resources, has been monitoring the situation in psychiatric hospitals in Romania over recent months. Information collected during visits to hospitals and from many other sources indicates that chronic lack of funding for mental health services in Romania has further deteriorated in the past 18 months. Reports from hospitals throughout the country speak of persistent shortages of medication, heating and food.

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

- expressing concern at the situation in the psychiatric hospital in Poiana Mare, where 17 patients have died so far this year;
- urging the government to take urgent measures to prevent further such deaths in the psychiatric hospital in Poiana Mare including the provision of adequate food, medication, heating fuel, bedding and appropriate clothes for all the patients;
- urging the government to establish a comprehensive and independent public inquiry into the situation in Poiana Mare hospital and other psychiatric hospitals, leading to concrete improvement in the care of patients;

- urging the prosecutor general to immediately order a post-mortem investigation of the bodies of 17 patients held in the Poiana Mare hospital morgue, to establish the cause of death.

**APPEALS TO: (Fax numbers may be difficult to reach – please keep trying)**

President Iliescu

D-lui Ion Iliescu, Excelenței Sale  
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76238 București, Romania  
**Fax: +40 21 411 3131**  
**Salutation: Dear President**

Prime Minister

D-lui Adrian Năstase  
Prim Președinte al Consiliului de Miniștri  
Guvernul României  
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71201 București, Romania  
**Fax: +40 21 222 5814**  
**Salutation: Dear Prime Minister**

Prosecutor General

Ilie Botoș  
Prim Președinte al Consiliului de Miniștri  
Procuror General al României, Bd. Unirii Nr 2-4  
76105 București, Romania  
**Fax: + 40 21 311 3939**  
**Salutation: Dear Prosecutor General**

Minister of Health

D-lui Brinzan Ovidiu  
Str. Cristian Popișteanu, nr. 1-3, sector 1,  
010024, București, Romania  
**Salutation: Dear Minister**

**COPIES TO:**

Foreign Minister

D-lui Mircea Geoană  
Ministru Afacerilor Externe  
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**Salutation: Dear Minister**

and to diplomatic representatives of Romania accredited to your country.

**PLEASE SEND APPEALS IMMEDIATELY.** Check with the International Secretariat, or your section office, if sending appeals after 2 April 2004.