

Report describes abuses in Serbian state mental institutions

By Dan Bilefsky

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BRUSSELS: A 21-year-old man with Down syndrome tied to a metal crib for 11 years. Children, naked from the waist down, left to eat and defecate in their beds. A 7-year-old girl with fluid in her brain left untreated "because she will die anyway."

These are some of alleged abuses in Serbian state mental institutions and orphanages described in a report to be released Wednesday by Mental Disability Rights International, a Washington-based group that spent four years investigating the conditions and the treatment of some of the nearly 17,200 children and adults with disabilities in institutions in Serbia.

In the report, which is expected to be read closely by European Union officials who are assessing Serbia's readiness to join the 27-member bloc, researchers concluded that "filthy conditions, contagious diseases, lack of medical care and rehabilitation and a failure to provide oversight renders placement in a Serbian institution life-threatening."

The institutions investigated include the Institution for Children and Youth Kolevka in Subotica; the Institute for Mentally Ill People in Curug; the Kulina Institution for Children and Youth; the Special Institute for Children and Youth in Stannica; and psychiatric hospitals in Vrsac and Kovin, east of Belgrade.

Eric Rosenthal, executive director of the rights group, said the use of physical restraints on children for years at a time was the most extreme he had seen in 14 years as a disability rights advocate. He said there were no enforceable laws in Serbia regulating the use of such restraints. "This is the most horrifying abuse I have seen on powerless children, who are tied to beds and unable to move," he said. "This constitutes a clear case of torture."

Vladimir Pesic, a Serbian government official dealing with disability issues, declined to comment, saying he had not seen the report. Health officials and hospital staff members quoted in the report said restraining patients was necessary to prevent self-injury.

Rosenthal is hoping that the report will exert pressure on the European Union to demand that Serbia take immediate action to improve conditions at the institutions.

Last week, the EU gave pro-Western forces in Serbia a lift by initialing a deal that would accelerate Serbia's joining the union by cementing closer economic and political ties. But the alleged abuses could add to the hurdles Belgrade faces, which include its failure to

arrest and turn over war crimes suspects indicted in The Hague and the uncertain future of the breakaway province of Kosovo.

Rosenthal said the extent of the abuse at mental institutions in Serbia was particularly egregious, given that the international community had spent tens of millions of euros in humanitarian aid to help to rebuild institutions in Serbia after the 1999 NATO-led war against the country when it was led by Slobodan Milosevic.

"The mental institutions have been newly rebuilt with the help of the West, so the abuse is happening in clean, new buildings built with foreign money," he said. "This tragedy could have been prevented."

Laurie Ahern, an investigator who toured the Serbian mental institutions with a registered nurse, said she was most alarmed by the case of the man with Down syndrome, who was tied to his metal bed at Stamnica, a state institution southeast of Belgrade.

When Ahern asked a nurse how long it had been since the patient had left the bed, the nurse replied, "Eleven years," she said.

"There were rows upon rows of young people with Down syndrome. These children are mobile and can move around. But they are being left in metal coffins to lie there until the day they die," Ahern said.