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Report damns mental health care

A US-based campaign group, Mental Disabilities Rights International, MDRI, has released a damning report on the state of mental health in Kosovo. The report is based on a two-year study carried out at the invitation of the OSCE and WHO. The Shtime home which houses 285 patients, the Pristina elderly home and Pristina University Hospital are amongst the institutions singled out. The MDRI investigation speaks of pervasive and systematic abuse of mental patients in public institutions, including physical assault and rape. Conditions in the institutions are said to be filthy and degrading...patients and staff alike have allegedly been threatened with punishment if they report the abuses. UNMIK is accused of disregarding its own standards for the protection and treatment of the mentally disabled and of turning a blind eye to evidence of abuse.

Éva Szeli is the European director of MDRI and based in Budapest. She blames the acute lack of monitoring and oversight for such rampant abuse of one of Kosovo's most vulnerable categories.

SZELI: "There is no way to report those for individuals, so that even individuals who suffer the worst type of abuses, particularly the women we talked to that are experiencing physical and sexual abuse, exploitation, rape and have no where to turn and are incredibly fearful of reporting some of the abuse they have suffered...we have also seen this with staff members who are afraid to come forward because they are afraid for their jobs... and there's really no system to protect either staff or patients that are willing to come forward and report some of abuses."

The situation is not unique to Kosovo says MDRI - the state of mental health in most countries is bad, but insists Éva Szeli, in the case of UNMIK, it failed to respond to the concerns raised by MDRI as far back as a year ago.

UNMIK acknowledges the validity of most of the content of the report but stresses it has moved to take action. A management committee has been set up to look into the allegations concerning the Shtime facility.

Hannu Vuori is the head UNMIK official at the Ministry of Health.

VUORI: "Yes, there is good reason to be critical, I don't deny that for a second, but the report does not in my mind recognize the fact that here has been a huge improvement during the last three years."

Vuori says he doesn't know of a single case where a victim has officially reported physical abuse. There may be truth to MDRI's claim that this is because people don't dare he says, but UNMIK can't act in the absence of an official complaint. Moreover he adds, many of the

accusations in the MDRI report are old and do not reflect the current situation.

VUORI: "They do report these instances that took place 2 or 3 years ago, as far as I can see, from the report which I have now read, they are not reporting a single new case, so after their preliminary report... I think that the management of these institutions have taken a tougher attitude and have managed to prevent new cases."

The MDRI report makes for grim reading - in one case, a woman patient was allegedly raped after employees locked her in a room with a male patient because they wanted to calm her down. The director of Kosovo's psychiatric institution reportedly told the MDRI team there was no money to fit a secure door to protect the women's wards, even though funds were available for other things in the facility. The conditions in Shtime are said to be specially bad - patients sleeping on concrete floors amid piles of human excrement or in soiled sheets - psychotropic drugs are also reportedly handed out with no monitoring. Sevdie Ahmeti of the Center for Protection of Women and Children corroborates the report.

AHMETI: "We have had complaints from a number of victims or their families....Shtimje and the old peoples' home here in Prishtina cannot deal with or prevent these kind of abuses. Because there is no organization, the management has been very superficial. And no attention is paid to these victims, these people that are inside and victims of different types of violence."

Hannu Vuori agrees that the Shtime facility is grim, but says it used to be much worse before.....

VUORI: "If you go there for the first time you will be shocked - it smells of urine and feces, but if you had been there three years ago when I went there for the first time you would say it is heaven compared to what it used to be...At the time there was no medical treatment whatsoever for the inmates, now they have a psychiatrist from Pristina University hospital visits them twice a week, they didn't have any dental care, now they have an agreement with Lipjan health house to get dental care, they have the same sort of agreement for pediatric services, gynecological services, so all that has radically improved, they didn't have a budget because nobody in Kosovo had a budget, now they have a budget, the physical premises have been quite considerably improved."

UNMIK says it is aware of the problems faced by mental patients but that it has had its hands tied by the need to concentrate on other areas in a post conflict society and a chronic lack of resources. An argument that fails to convince Éva Szeli of MDRI:

SZELI: "Setting up a system of investigation for human rights abuses doesn't necessarily need to cost a lot of money, building on existing community resources doesn't cost a lot of money...in fact the international organizations have spent an incredible amount of money in this area ...one of the major critiques made in the report is that a lot of the funds have been misdirected."

A case in point is this huge grant that has been received from the Dutch government -instead of focusing on getting the individuals out of Shtime and integrating them into society, says Éva

Szeli, the money is being invested in rebuilding Shtime the institution. But this is Kosovo, still only 3 years after the war stresses, Hannu Vuori -

VUORI: "They don't recognize for instance that 80 % of the inmates are not Albanians but they are Serbs, Montenegrans and, Macedonians, who have been abandoned by their families... How long do you think a mentally retarded Serb would survive on the streets of Kosovo, when he has no family here or nothing like that?"

Another problem with UNMIK'S approach to mental health, says Éva Szeli, is the lack of involvement of what MDRI calls stakeholders - people who have mental disabilities and their families...

SZELI: "These individuals should have been involved from the very beginning because they are the ones most affected. However the stigma is so pervasive that there is a lack of belief that these individuals can speak for themselves. The metaphor I always use is the idea of going to a women's rights conference that is run by men and attended by men, that are discussing in the abstract the rights of women."

Vuori says this is happening, but not as fast as anybody would like.

VUORI: "They stress very strongly this community-based approach: close the institutions, put the inmates into the community and so on - well that is exactly what the official Kosovo mental health development strategy says. ... we have opened I think currently 4 community mental health centers, in two towns we have protected apartments under construction... so we are going in exactly the direction they want, but we don't have the money to do it in the time frame that they would like."

Another wakeup call to international donors that now is not the time to give up on Kosovo. That's all for today from UNMIK on Air...