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Report of abuse in Kosovo clinics

UNITED NATIONS -- Patients in Kosovo's U.N.-run mental health facilities are subjected to attacks, rape and gross neglect, a two-year investigation has found.

Investigators couldn't confirm every case, but there was "probable cause to conclude that physical violence and sexual abuse are significant problems within these institutions," Mental Disability Rights International said in a report released Wednesday.

The Washington-based group examined care at the main U.N.-run psychiatric centers in Kosovo: the 285-bed Special Center at Shtime, the 165-bed Elderly Home in Pristina, and the psychiatric ward at Pristina University Hospital.

The report said conditions at Shtime are the worst, and it called for a timetable to close the facility as soon as alternatives can be found for its residents.

"People spend their days in inactivity, without any semblance of privacy, living in filth," it said. "Much of the institution is engulfed in the stench of urine and feces and is infested with flies."

There is no psychiatrist on staff and the only form of treatment for most people with mental illness is psychotropic medication, administered "with a dangerous lack of monitoring." There is no treatment for the two-thirds of the population diagnosed with mental disabilities, it said.

The United Nations has been administering Kosovo since a 78-day NATO bombing campaign forced Yugoslav troops to withdraw from the province in June 1999.

U.N. spokesman Farhan Haq said the U.N. Mission in Kosovo does not dispute most of the report's findings. He said the mission is aware of the abuses and is working to address them.

"We are moving in the direction recommended by the report. However, we need resources to improve staffing, training, facilities," he said. "In terms of mental health, donor support has been generally poor, with the exception of Japan."

Calling the conditions at the three facilities "appalling," the organization's executive director, Eric Rosenthal, accused the U.N. Mission in Kosovo "of violating the very human rights that the U.N. works to protect and uphold throughout the world," and called for urgent reforms.

The organization demanded immediate action to protect people in the institutions from violence and sexual abuse, to investigate abuses, and to establish services to replace lifetime custodial care.

The organization's investigators saw patients attack each other on three occasions and observed two patients with knives and two others with large sticks. A woman who carried a broom handle with her at all times said she needed it for self-protection, and investigators watched her use it when attacked.

The report also cited interviews with four women who said they had been subjected to sexual abuse by male residents.

At Pristina University Hospital, the report said, a patient beat another to death with an iron bar, and in May 2002 a woman patient was raped by another patient. That same month, staff reported that a patient was injured when he was hit with a marble tile by another patient, it said.

Two women who were once patients independently reported that a male staff member had sexual relations with patients - and both were threatened by him if they came forward, the report said.

At the Elderly Home, it said investigators spoke with a former staff member who believed she lost her job partly for reporting sexual and physical abuse in the facility - including a male resident who received outside money for "the involuntary prostitution of a female resident."

The organization said it sent investigative teams to Kosovo six times between September 2000 and July 2002 to prepare the report, which was funded by the Open Society Institute.

The investigators also met disability and women's rights activists, mental health professionals, people with disabilities, family members, and representatives of the United Nations and international organizations.