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### **Forgotten by the U.N.**

TO LIVE in a psychiatric hospital in Kosovo, a recent inquiry has found, is to live in a special kind of hell. Women are raped by male patients while staff watch. Mentally retarded patients sit in enforced idleness, day after day, without treatment or instruction. Reports of abuse are met with threats and retaliation. Filth is everywhere. People who need counseling are instead drugged. People who should be free are locked up for life.

All of which might evoke sympathy but little wider interest -- Kosovo is a poor place, after all, and people with mental disabilities suffer in many poor places -- but for this particularly shameful element: The institutions in question were under the supervision of the United Nations while the abuses were taking place; and American and Scandinavian do-gooders -- or supposed do-gooders -- failed to remedy the situation, even after being alerted. Their failure in turn reflects a much broader failing of international aid. Organizations that care deeply about human rights in general routinely slight the inalienable rights of humans who are mentally ill or mentally retarded. And developed nations that years ago learned that the mentally disabled are better off in their communities and out of large institutions forget that lesson when they venture into the developing world, where they build or rebuild mental hospitals (and orphanages) while neglecting community solutions.

For these findings and insights we are indebted to Mental Disability Rights International, a unique nonprofit organization whose executive director, Eric Rosenthal, refuses to accept that the mentally disabled in poor countries should be consigned to lives of torture. Mr. Rosenthal has looked at aid programs in Russia, Romania, Latin America and now Kosovo and has found a dispiriting sameness. Donors rebuild institutions that should be emptied because they like to see shiny, spanking new results from their aid. The mistreated patients (or orphans) inside the institutions continue to be mistreated, and the new buildings do not stay shiny for long. Mental disability advocates back home are not consulted; women's rights campaigners consider mental disability outside their purview. "And so this is the ultimate forgotten problem," Mr. Rosenthal says.

His organization held off releasing its findings on Kosovo for a year, preferring reform to publicity. But U.N. officials did not respond. When the report was finally released, U.N. officials such as Fred Eckhard, spokesman for Secretary General Kofi Annan, acknowledged the problems but pleaded (1) inability to influence local officials and (2) poverty. But the U.N. mission in Kosovo after the war, in 2000 and 2001, enjoyed the absolute power of a viceroy and, compared to most aid missions, ample resources. That no one could bother to provide a locked door between the men's and women's dormitories of Shtime hospital indeed reflects a shortfall, but not of cash.