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AVAILABILITY OF ADEQUATE MEDICAL TREATMENT FOR POST-TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD) IN KOSOVO

NB: This note has been jointly prepared by UNMIK, Office of Returns and Communities, and the Kosovo Ministry of Health. It is offered as advice to governments and NGO's enquiring about treatment for returnees.

Kosovo's health care system remains in a period of transition. Prevailing problems compromising Kosovo's ability to effectively treat Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) include: 1. a general lack of mental health professionals in Kosovo; 2. insufficient financial resources; 3. too few professionals who can assess people with special needs; and 4. inaccessibility of services for those living in rural areas. In particular, it should be noted that mental health services for children have not yet been established. Despite continued efforts by the Ministry of Health, NGOs and donor support, large numbers of socially dependent and chronically mentally ill people are unable to receive adequate treatment in Kosovo because the mental health needs of the population are very high and the human and institutional resources in the mental health field are very low.

Kosovo's health care system is based on a two-tiered system comprised of public care and NGO care. The public health system provides psychiatric care in hospitals and Community Mental Health Centres (CMHC). However, public care is biologically oriented (drug) treatment with very little or no socio-therapeutic or psychotherapeutic treatment. CMHC focus on the rehabilitation of people with severe chronic mental illness, not on cases of PTSD.

Ministry of Health officials confirm that no adequate treatment of PTSD exists in the public health care sector in Kosovo. Dr. Ferid Agani (former Director of the Department of Strategic Management, Ministry of Health in Kosovo) explained: "There are no facilities available for any non psychotic disorders. There are no facilities for the treatment of PTSD in the institutions because there are no experts...counselling is not available in public health institutions." In addition, a limited number of drugs are available in Kosovo and those that are available are not affordable by the vast majority of Kosovo citizens.

The second tier of Kosovo's health care system, the NGO community, also remains inadequate in its ability to treat people suffering from PTSD. NGOs are overwhelmed with work and must provide services with insufficient psychiatric and other qualified staff. The demand for their services greatly outweighs their capacity. The largest NGO, the Kosovo Rehabilitation Centre for Torture Victims (KRCT), is active in seven locations across Kosovo, each serving regions with a population of some 300,000 people. However, it remains poorly staffed. Overall, the staff consists of 4 part-time psychiatrists and one part-time psychologist serving each region once a week. The Centre for Stress Management and Education (CSME), another NGO, can also make only a limited contribution to the treatment of PTSD because it has only one part-time psychologist that it shares with KRCT.

It is important to note that proper treatment of PTSD cannot be reduced to taking antidepressants for a period of time. Effective treatment of PTSD must include psychotherapy, counselling and strong social support. Unfortunately, this kind of treatment is still not available for the majority of those in need despite considerable efforts and initial results of the Ministry of Health and UNMIK to improve the situation in this field. A comprehensive strategy involving all relevant players needs to be developed to ensure that traumatized people receive the attention their condition demands.

Given the poor treatment capacity, experts, including the Kosovo Ministry of Health, agree that persons in asylum countries suffering from PTSD should conclude treatment before returning to Kosovo. Persons forcibly returned to Kosovo before their treatment has been concluded have a high potential that their mental health status will deteriorate due to the fact that they would not be able to get psychotherapy and socio-therapy treatment, even if they have sufficient funds to buy medication.

Based on the above, it remains the position of UNMIK that persons suffering from and undergoing treatment for PTSD should not be forcibly returned to Kosovo.

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