Mental health system strengthened in Iraq

Irbi – Iraq, 28 Jan, 2009- Psychosocial and mental health services for people in Iraq with focus on northern governorates are being strengthened through a new project endorsed by the World Health Organization (WHO) and Iraqi authorities and funded by The Netherlands.

This two-year project was endorsed on 20 January by the Ministry of Martyrs and Anfal Affairs, the Ministry of Health in Iraq's Kurdistan region and WHO. It aims to improve and strengthen the quality of social and mental health care services by rebuilding psychiatric infrastructure to care for Iraqis, particularly women suffering from mental disorders and substance abuse. The project also aims to develop community-based and decentralized mental health facilities in the northern governorates of Suleymaniyyah, Erbil and Mosul.

While mental health services have long been present in Baghdad, northern areas of the country have been without psychiatric inpatient facilities. There is also a recognized need for such services in northern Iraq, particularly among people traumatized by the Anfal operations of the mid- to late-1980s. An assessment found that some 182,000 people had been affected, predominantly women, who faced rape, psychological abuse, and physical and mental torture. The Iraq Mental Health Survey of 2006-07 showed that 35.5% of screened individuals were emotionally distressed (40.4% females and 30.4% males) and (49.9%) of people in the 50+ age group were emotionally distressed.

"The lack of psychosocial health services in northern Iraq, combined with the clear mental health needs for Iraqis that arose out of the Al Anfal operations, were the driving forces behind our joint-efforts to provide appropriate psychosocial care in this part of the country in close coordination with the ministry of Health in Iraq led by Dr. Saleh Al-Hasnawi," said Dr Naeema Al-Gasseer, WHO Representative to Iraq. "This initiative will help us overcome those results and move towards a brighter future."

As part of the new project, three community-based social and mental support centers will be established. These centers will mainly serve women and their families by providing psychological screening, counseling, referral and provision of vocational training for the most affected women and girls.

Dr Al-Gasseer led three days of consultations with a team of WHO national experts to finalize the detailed work plan for the project and clarify roles and responsibilities. She commended the efforts of the Ministry of Health, led by Dr. Abdul Rhman Younis, and the Ministry of Martyrs and Anfal Affairs. The consultations took place at the Irbi offices of the Coordinator for United Nations Affairs (OCUNA) with the presence of mental health professionals, engineers from different specialties, Anfal community representatives, parliamentarians, lawyers and technicians.
The Minister of Martyrs and Anfal Affairs, Mrs. Chanar Saad Abdulla, said: "We are committed to serving the victims of Anfal and empowering them, especially the women, to be active members of their communities. We believe in ensuring that the services provided to them should be on an equal basis as other communities."

Dr. Abdul Rahman Younis the Minister of Health said: "Strengthening psychosocial services in Iraq is a priority especially for the most vulnerable populations and requires close collaboration between the Ministry of Health in Iraq and in the Kurdistan region."

Dr. Al-Gasseer thanked OCUNA for hosting the consultation and Dr. Dindar Zibari, the Kurdistan Regional Government's focal point to the United Nations, and his team, for their support.

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