

WHO Mental Health Assessment in Aceh (January 2005)

The assessment was conducted by Dr Saraceno (Director, Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse, WHO) and Professor Minas (University of Melbourne).

Persons affected by a catastrophic event - such as the tsunami of 26 December 2004 - are exposed to extreme stressors and are vulnerable to the development of serious mental health problems and mental disorders, immediately and over a period of years.

A substantial increase in need for mental health and psychosocial support may be expected as a consequence of the disaster. The pre-existing morbidity plus the additional morbidity due to the disaster will require a substantial enhancement of the mental health system capacity.

The number of mental health professionals in Aceh has been substantially below the mean for Indonesia. In addition it should be noted that most of mental health staff in Aceh are concentrated in the psychiatric hospital of Aceh and therefore do not serve the people of Aceh who are in the community.

As a result of the tsunami, there are many agencies that are currently providing, or that intend to provide, psychosocial support in Aceh. A coordination process has been established by the Ministry of Health with support from WHO.

An advance team was sent to Aceh in the first week of January to conduct a qualitative rapid assessment. Most of the survivors showed one or more of these symptoms: fear, panic, helplessness, emotional numbing, disbelief, confusion, nightmares and flashbacks, hyper-activity, fear of returning to the original place, fear of water, fear of being inside a building, restlessness, and fatigue.

Effective social and mental health interventions are available and should be implemented through a strategic plan. A comprehensive strategic plan has been written to assist in avoiding fragmentation of efforts in achieving the most effective and efficient use of limited resources.

The goals of the plan are to:

- provide immediate and long-term psychosocial support to the population of Aceh
- strengthen the health care system to provide for people with newly-developed mental health needs and people with pre-existing mental and substance abuse disorders.

The plan consists of five components: (a) assessment and monitoring, (b) coordination, (c) evidence-based interventions (as described in existing WHO documents), (d) strengthening the capacity of communities and health system to manage mental health problems, and (e) building a comprehensive mental health system.

This plan will be under the authority of the Ministry of Health. The plan should be coordinated by the provincial health authority and implemented by district health authorities. The activities should be undertaken in coordination with, or delegated to, professional organizations, national, local and international NGOs, and UN and international agencies. The Aceh community leaders should actively participate in all elements of the further planning and implementation of the plan. The World Health Organization will provide technical and, where possible, financial support including deployment of mental health professionals in Aceh to assist in coordination.