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“Fistula Fortnight” Opens in Nigeria: 46 Women Treated for Obstetric Fistula on First Day

Hundreds More to be Treated Over Two Weeks

Katsina, Nigeria, 22 February 2005 – As “Fistula Fortnight”, the largest surgical effort to treat women living with obstetric fistula over a two-week period, opened in Nigeria, 46 women were treated on the first day. A team of four volunteer doctors from the United Kingdom and the United States are partnering with a team of 24 Nigerian expert fistula surgeons and trainee doctors to treat hundreds of women living with fistula in the northern States of the country.

Nigeria may have one of the highest rates of fistula in the world. It is estimated that as many as 800,000 women could be living with fistula in the country, with another 20,000 new cases each year. The teams of international and national doctors will be divided among four different hospitals in the northern States of Nigeria during the Fortnight to perform surgery and advance their skills in fistula repair. Specially trained nurses and social workers will provide essential post-operative care and counselling to ensure full recovery of patients after surgery.

“We hope that the ‘Fistula Fortnight’ will help to heal wounds and renew hope for hundreds of women suffering from fistula in Nigeria,” said Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, Executive Director of UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund. “It is one step to help address the tremendous backlog of patients and get care to those in need.”

Obstetric fistula is a preventable childbirth injury that results in chronic incontinence and leaves women stigmatized. Without treatment, they become social outcasts. It occurs when a woman endures obstructed labour for days on end without medical intervention – typically a Caesarean section – to relieve it. In nearly all cases the baby dies. Reconstructive surgery can mend the fistula, but most women cannot access or afford medical treatment.

“Fistula is both preventable and treatable, yet millions of women still suffer from this tragic condition. Fistula is not an easy subject to talk about but let's start talking openly and try and put an end – together - to this needless suffering,” said Richard Branson, Chairman of the Virgin Group of Companies, a key partner in the “Fistula Fortnight”.

Obstetric fistula tends to be common in countries with high maternal mortality rates. In Nigeria, a woman has a 1 in 18 lifetime risk of dying of complications of childbirth – a stark contrast to Europe, where the figure is 1 in 2,400.

“I join you all in encouraging all stakeholders - the Government, development partners, faith-based organizations, non-governmental organizations, traditional and religious leaders - to

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redouble the efforts to solve the problem of fistula in Nigeria,” said Mrs. Rita Akpan, Nigerian Minister of Women Affairs, speaking at the launch event today at Babbar Ruga Fistula Hospital in Katsina State.

This two-week pilot project is the result of a unique partnership among UNFPA, Federal and State governments of Nigeria, Virgin Unite, the Nigerian Red Cross, Voluntary Service Overseas, health professionals and local non-governmental organizations. Long-term benefits of the Fortnight project include: more trained Nigerian doctors, nurses and social workers capable of treating fistula patients; better equipped hospitals in four northern States where the problem is most severe; and increased awareness about fistula in rural communities to help spread the word that treatment is available.

The “Fistula Fortnight” is part of a global Campaign to End Fistula, launched by UNFPA and partners in 2003. The Campaign is active in more than 30 countries in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia and the Arab States.

For more on the “Fistula Fortnight” and the Global Campaign, visit www.endfistula.org
A full press kit on the Fortnight is available online for journalists.

UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, is the world’s largest multilateral source of population assistance. Making motherhood safer for all women is at the heart of UNFPA’s mandate. The Fund is spearheading the “Fistula Fortnight” and the global Campaign to End Fistula.

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