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More Than 300 Women Treated in First Week of “Fistula Fortnight” in Nigeria

SOKOTO, Nigeria, 1 March 2005 – By Day 8 of “Fistula Fortnight,” 348 women with obstetric fistula had been surgically treated by a team of Nigerian and volunteer international doctors at four sites in northern Nigeria. Dozens more women will receive treatment over the two-week period that ends on 6 March.

“I’m so happy,” said 13-year-old Ubaida Surajo, one of 10 women and girls treated on the first day of the Fortnight at the Babba Ruga Fistula Hospital in Katsina, in the nearby Katsina State. “I’m grateful to the doctors, nurses and all the people involved who have helped me stop leaking.”

Twelve expert Nigerian surgeons have joined forces with four international doctors from the United States and the United Kingdom, along with 12 Nigerian trainee doctors, 40 nurses and 40 social workers, to surgically repair and rehabilitate hundreds of women at four sites in Sokoto, Kano, Katsina and Kebbi States.

Obstetric fistula is a devastating childbirth injury that occurs when a woman endures prolonged obstructed labour, sometimes for days at a time, without the benefit of skilled medical intervention. Often, the baby will die and the woman will suffer chronic incontinence. Women affected by fistula may be abandoned by their husbands, ostracized by their communities and blamed for their condition.

Studies indicate that as many as 800,000 Nigerian women could be living with fistula, with an estimated 20,000 new cases each year. The problem is particularly severe in the country’s northern States. A Nigerian woman has a 1 in 18 lifetime risk of dying from complications of childbirth – a stark contrast to Europe, where the figure is one in 2,400.

“In Nigeria, women are acknowledged as primary providers of health care for their families and communities,” said Gaji Fatima Dantata, the Commissioner for Women’s Affairs in Kano State. “However, because of cultural practices, social inhibitions, illiteracy and low social status, their own health concerns and needs are often overlooked.”

The Nigerian Government, at federal, state and local levels, has played a crucial role in making the Fortnight a success. The Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Women’s Affairs have provided and distributed equipment and supplies and have mobilized funds for rehabilitation programmes. The four State governments have renovated facilities, selected staff for training and provided food and transportation for patients.

“The Government of Nigeria can continue to count on UNFPA support,” said Fama Hane Ba, Director of the Africa Division of UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund. “Together, we must ensure male and community involvement in the fight against fistula as well as access to quality emergency obstetric care.”

Prevention is the key to ending fistula. Improving quality and access to maternal health care could help save the lives of hundreds of thousands of women who die from complications of pregnancy or childbirth in Nigeria and around the world.

“Fistula is so preventable, I just hate to think what these women’s lives would be like without the surgery,” said Gloria Esegbona, a Briton of Nigerian descent and one of four international doctors participating in the Fortnight project.

The “Fistula Fortnight” is the result of a unique partnership among UNFPA, the Nigerian Government, Virgin Unite, the Nigerian Red Cross, Voluntary Service Overseas, health professionals and national non-governmental organizations, providing resources, technical expertise, medical equipment and training to turn the Fortnight into a reality.

The “Fistula Fortnight” is part of the global Campaign to End Fistula, launched by UNFPA and partners in 2003. The Campaign, which is active in more than 35 countries in Africa, South Asia and the Arab region, focuses on preventing fistula, treating women who are affected and providing social support for women after surgery.

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.

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

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