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564 Women Operated on during “Fistula Fortnight”

ABUJA, Nigeria, 7 March 2005 – A total of 564 women were operated on during the “Fistula Fortnight,” an unprecedented surgical effort to treat women living with obstetric fistula and train doctors in repair techniques at four sites in northern Nigeria.

“For 20 years I had been leaking,” said 60-year-old Aminatu Liman, who suffered fistula after three days of labour while trying to deliver her third child, a stillborn baby boy. She was treated on the second day of the Fortnight and was recovering well this week at the Maryam Abacha Women and Children’s Hospital in Sokoto. “I’m very happy all the inconvenience is gone ... I’m so grateful.”

UNFPA, the United Nations Population Fund, joined forces for the two-week pilot project with Federal and State Nigerian Governments, Virgin Unite, the Nigerian Red Cross, Volunteer Service Overseas, Nigerian non-governmental organizations and health professionals from Nigeria, the United Kingdom and the United States.

“If you see (the patients) when they arrive, they feel like outcasts. There is no hope. When they have their fistulas repaired, naturally they are very happy,” said Mustafa Lawal, one of the trainee surgeons based at the Birnin Kebbi VVF Centre in Kebbi State. “It’s a very good development for UNFPA and its partners to train us as fistula surgeons.”

Obstetric fistula is a preventable childbirth injury that occurs when a woman endures prolonged obstructed labour without medical intervention. Often the baby dies and the woman is left with chronic incontinence.

Studies indicate that as many as 800,000 Nigerian women are living with fistula, with another 20,000 new cases developing each year. The problem is particularly severe in the country’s northern states.

About 15 per cent of all pregnancies will result in complications that require emergency medical intervention. A Nigerian woman has a 1 in 18 lifetime risk of dying from complications of childbirth. That figure drops to 1 in 2,400 in Europe.

“Women living with fistula put a human face on the necessity of having good maternal health care,” said Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, UNFPA’s Executive Director. “The ‘Fistula Fortnight’ has helped us address the tremendous backlog of patients and care for those in need. Together we can end fistula by strengthening maternal health systems.”

In addition to treating hundreds of women, the “Fistula Fortnight” will ensure that more Nigerian doctors, nurses and social workers are able to treat fistula patients and that the hospitals at the four sites are better equipped. Most importantly, the Fortnight has increased awareness that treatment is available in rural communities where fistula is prevalent.

“For so long, these women suffered in silence. Before it was a household issue only discussed in the home. Now it is a public issue, and people know about it,” said Aliyu Yakubu, UNFPA Programme Adviser in Sokoto State. “We must continue with follow-up counselling and advocacy at the community level. We don’t want to see them back again. We want them cured, with healthy babies.”

The “Fistula Fortnight” ran from 21 February through 6 March. The event is part of a UNFPA-led global Campaign to End Fistula, launched in 2003. The Campaign, which is active in more than 35 countries in Africa, South Asia and the Arab States, focuses on preventing fistula from occurring, treating women who are affected and providing rehabilitation for survivors to ensure that they reintegrate successfully into their communities.

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.**

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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