

PRESS RELEASE

UNICEF helps the city of Bam launch its first ever telephone hotline service for children

TEHRAN, 10th October 2005. The city of Bam in south east Iran has launched its first ever telephone hotline service for children and their families. The hotline, which is open 12 hours a day, is staffed by social workers from the State Welfare Organisation, one of UNICEF's key partners in the city, after it was hit by a devastating earthquake in December 2003.

"Counselling over the telephone has proved to be very effective in helping people with their problems because of confidentiality," said Amir Ghaderi, UNICEF's Assistant in Child Protection. "By using this hotline, they can remain anonymous and at the same time receive the advice they need."

The hotline employs 2 UNICEF trained social workers and two advisors for psychological and legal support. They work in shifts, ensuring the service is manned from 8 in the morning to 8 in the evening.

It has been modelled on similar services that are already operating in Iran's major cities. However due to the massive loss of life following the Bam earthquake, when many children lost one or both parents, the counsellors were also trained to deal with post traumatic disorders.

The aim is to create a level of trust between the caller and the counsellor, so that problems can be solved at an early stage. If the problem is too serious for them to handle, the hotline acts as a bridge, connecting the caller to a specialized service.

"We have had several cases of runaway girls who have been introduced to us by the police," says Marzieh Arjmand, from the State Welfare Organisation. "We can help these girls through the hotline. We also know there are many girls and women who are being abused and exploited. They might not know where to go to get help but through the hotline, it is much easier to deal with their problems."

The telephone hotline complements UNICEF's family reunification scheme, which focuses on getting families or extended families to deal with their own problems. Now, if anyone has a problem or is worried about something, they can call the free phone number and receive advice. Sometimes just having a person to talk to is all that is needed.

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