

Sweden: Refugee children fall into a coma



She has escaped and is now in Europe Photo: REUTERS / GIORGOS MOUTAFIS

In Sweden, hundreds of refugee children fell into a coma-like state. They were informed that their families were being deported.

02.04.2017, 14:19

A mysterious illness has caused Sweden's attention for years. **Refugee children** fall into a coma-like state. They are completely passive, immobile, show no signs of muscle tension, live withdrawn, are dumb, unable to eat and drink, incontinent and do not respond to physical stimuli or pain.

Outside Uppgivenhetssyndrom or Resignation Syndrome (RS), the Scandinavian country is hardly noticed. Hundreds of children have already been ill after their families have been informed that they are to be deported to their country of origin.

Only certain children affected

The disease occurred in the early 2000s, says **Göran Bodegård**, director of the Child Psychiatry Department of the **Karolinska University Clinic in Stockholm**, the US magazine *The New Yorker*. More and more parents were suddenly in the emergency room with their apathetic children. The atmosphere reminded him of **Michelangelo's** Roman **Pietà**. The curtains were drawn, the lights turned off. Mothers whispered, seldom talking to their sick children and stared into the darkness. They were convinced that their offspring would die. But what if they had not known about cholera or an unknown disease? But the diagnosis was: resignation syndromes.

According to the study "**Resignation Syndromes: Catatonia? Culture-Bound**" between 2003 and 2005, more than 400 sick children were reported, most of them between eight and fifteen years old. Although the number of patients has decreased, the syndrome remains medically but still mysterious. There are two reasons for this: Firstly, cases outside Sweden are not known, and secondly, they only concern certain refugee children. Almost all children diagnosed are from former Yugoslav and Soviet countries. Some belong to the Roma or Uighurs.

In 2006, a team of psychologists, political scientists and sociologists emphasized the link between the disease and the cultural backgrounds of those affected. The symptoms would only occur in a particular society. **Edward Shorter**, a medical historian at the University of Toronto, tells *The New Yorker* that each culture has a "symptom repertoire, a selection of physical symptoms that are available to the subconscious to give physical expression to psychological conflicts."

There are examples of this: in parts of **India**, men suffer from a cultural-induced sexual neurosis, the Dhat syndrome. The affected people believe that they lose their life energy by masturbation, nightly ejaculations, or sometimes by the urine. Or something in **Nigeria** where Brain Fog syndrome is common. Students suffer



Lifeless lost or protective function?

The resignation syndrome was recognized by the Swedish health authorities as a new diagnostic item in early 2014. It is no longer the case that children are faking these symptoms. Nevertheless, the exact causes of the disease are still in the dark. One explanation could be that after the dramatic events such as flight and threats, children cling to the hope in the new home. If, however, they are no longer present—for example, if they are deported to their original land—they would fall into a coma-like state.

Magnus Kihlbom, director of the Institute for Child Psychology in Stockholm, writes in the medical journal *Läkartidningen* that the children show their will to death. He quotes the Holocaust survivor and psychiatrist Bruno Bettelheim, who described concentration camp prisoners who were psychically and physically so exhausted that they lost their vitality. "They no longer ate, were still and motionless, and later they died."

Some psychologists are of the opinion that it is a communication of the children, when words can no longer describe their trauma. The medical doctor Elisabeth Hultcrantz looks similar. For them, the coma has a kind of "protective function." When children are forced to return to the countries with which they link terrible experiences or perhaps they do not know, they withdraw.

Asylum application rejected, fallen into a coma

According to *The New Yorker*, the professor at **Linköping University** has already **treated** more than 40 resignation syndrome children. One of them is the now 13-year-old Georgi, who at the age of five years **fled** with his family from the **Russian** republic of North Ossetia–Alania and came to Sweden. His father, Soslan, was assassinated because he helped to found a "pacifist, religious sect" which rejected the close ties between the Russian Orthodox Church and the state.

When the family learned in summer 2015 that the asylum application was rejected for the second time, they appealed. But Georgi had changed while waiting for the result, says the father. He had become unapproachable if no Russian had spoken, words were mere sounds that could not be understood at all. He had withdrawn more and more.

In December 2015, the asylum application was finally rejected, saying: "You must leave Sweden." Georgi had gone to his room and closed his eyes. The next morning



After a few days, Hultcrantz examined the boy, who could not move or move. It seemed as if he was sleeping. A contact was not possible. Because Georgi has not eaten anything for days, he has lost a lot of weight after only one week. In the emergency room the family was told that the reflexes were intact and the pulse normal. But when he lifted his arm, he fell to his face. No reaction. Finally, the "apathetic" had to be artificially fed via a tube. "They look like Snow White," Hultcrantz tells *The New Yorker*, "They've fallen out of the world."

Too much promised?

So far, no "apathetic" has died from the disease, but some children have suffered from the syndrome for more than four years. Lars Joelsson, the President of the Swedish Association for Child and Youth Psychiatry, says that doctors do not have the tools to treat these patients. One can only observe and beware that they do not die. It was a dilemma, says Joellson. Doctors suddenly do not have to deal with medical problems, but also those who are socially and structurally – and fall within the government's sphere of responsibility. "People think they are coming to the promised land," he said. "We do not live our high ideals."

Nevertheless, the question arises which medicine helps against the syndrome. The Swedish Social and Health Authority, in its [Guidelines on Uppgivenessyndrom](#) published in 2013, writes that a patient is not completely healthy until the family has received a permanent residence permit.

At Georgi this was true. In May 2016, the authorities told his family that she could stay in Sweden forever because her son needed safe and stable living conditions to recover. But Georgi did not react to the positive news either. Two more weeks passed – only then did he open his eyes for a moment. Three days after the first reaction he drank water again with a spoon, a day later he ate an ice. In some patients, it takes even months before they realize that their situation has changed, it says in medical records.

Today Georgi goes back to school. Although his achievements are not quite as good as before the illness, but physician Hultcrantz is sure that the boy will be completely healthy again.

Like a glass box

To the journalist who wrote the article in *The New Yorker*, Georgi says that it was never his intention to fall asleep. He only wanted to spend one day in bed because he was angry with his parents. "Why should I go to school if I can not stay here in



But suddenly he had felt that he could not control his body or his mind. "I was tired and had no appetite," says Georgi. He had found himself in a glass box filled with water. "I did not understand that this is not the reality, it was difficult because I could have killed any movement, I lived there."

(Jürgen Klatzer)