April 14, 2000

Nancy Lindborg, Mercy Corps
Gerald Martone, International Rescue Committee
Co-Chairs
Disaster Response Committee, InterAction
1717 Massachusetts Avenue, NW, Suite 801
Washington, DC 20036

Co-Chairs:

It is commonly understood that the goals of a humanitarian agency are to save lives and alleviate suffering while respecting human dignity. These goals are to be achieved through the guiding principles of impartiality, independence, and neutrality. As a humanitarian agency that adheres strictly to these principles, Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders (MSF) believes that proactive solicitation of coordination with the US military with financial support of the US government has jeopardized the ability of the InterAction Disaster Response Committee (DRC) to represent impartial humanitarian organizations. As such, I am writing to inform you that after careful consideration, Médecins Sans Frontières has decided to withdraw from InterAction's Disaster Response Committee (DRC).

Our major concern is that one of the DRC's central activities - military coordination - is in contradiction with our humanitarian principles. We take issue with and are opposed to linking humanitarian organizations with the military. While we trust that the intention of the DRC's interaction with the military is to increase their understanding of the humanitarian organizations' principles, we believe that a body which seeks to represent independent humanitarian organizations compromises its neutrality and independence when one of its four core activities is active participation in military briefings, conferences, war games, and exercises that are funded and orchestrated by the US government.

In 1999, for example, as part of its military cooperation activities, DRC helped brief US government intelligence analysts on the modalities of NGO disaster response operations, and arranged military training opportunities for InterAction members to participate in a major field exercise. In addition, one of the DRC's stated objectives in 1999 was to plan and coordinate relief operations in the Caribbean among US military, Central and South American militaries, NGO's, governmental organizations, and the UN.

To demonstrate our alarm over civil-military collaboration and its implications for humanitarian organizations, we refer to the NATO draft doctrine for Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC), which was circulated to DRC members following the attendance of a SHAPE civil-military conference by a DRC staff member. The doctrine clearly states the primacy of military and political goals in the CIMIC agenda: "Civil military liaison provides the basis from which other
CIMIC functions develop and will always be conducted in support of the military mission.” The document also states that these activities are to be “derived from a political strategic objective.”

We question how humanitarian organizations can maintain their impartiality and independence of action once they agree to act in coordination with, or effectively under the coordination of, a military structure. We believe that the unacceptable result of such coordination is that humanitarian activities are subordinated to agendas other than humanitarian. We disagree with conferring humanitarian credibility, as we believe the actions of the DRC are doing, on any body which exists primarily to fulfill a military objective.

We believe that the DRC’s extensive relationship with the military is in contradiction with InterAction’s own Mission Statement to: "Enhance the identity, autonomy, credibility and diverse perspectives of each member agency."

Furthermore, in the spirit of political independence, which we trust all humanitarian actors adhere to, we would like to register our concern with the fact that the DRC is funded almost exclusively by the US government to implement, among its other activities, the liaison with the US military and others. We believe that such a clear government link through the DRC — a body which represents a framework for a common voice within the international humanitarian community — to a major military power, has the potential to endanger our collective independence and jeopardizes the fundamental impartial appearance and nature of InterAction members.

The principles of the Sphere Humanitarian Charter, the primary reference document for most humanitarian organizations, state that humanitarian organizations will act in accordance with the Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and Non-Governmental Organizations in Disaster Relief. These principles state, inter alia, that: “Aid will not be used to further a particular political or religious standpoint,” and “We shall endeavor not to act as instruments of government of foreign policy.”

In conclusion, we believe that the DRC’s extensive work with the US military and their major funding by the US government, jeopardizes the neutrality of NGO members and is in contradiction with MSF’s humanitarian principles as well as in contradiction with other humanitarian charters. For these reasons, MSF is withdrawing from the DRC.

Sincerely,

Joelle Tanguy
Executive Director
Médecins Sans Frontières/Doctors Without Borders, USA

Cc: Jim K. Bishop, Director, Disaster Response Unit, InterAction
    Members, Disaster Response Unit, InterAction