UN Agencies Must Lead Humanitarian Aid Efforts

**military support for humanitarian aid risks being seen as support for military actions**

*Tirana, Albania, April 11, 1999* - The international medical relief organization Medecins Sans Frontiers (MSF) today called on NATO and the international community to respect the essential and long-term neutral and impartial character of humanitarian assistance. MSF also called on UN agencies and especially UNHCR to more actively fulfill their mandate to protect and assist refugees, and to coordinate with independent and neutral NGOs in Albania.

At this point NATO member states with support from their militaries are establishing and seeking to manage refugee camps inside Albania. For example, France and Germany have announced their intention to set up transit camps within a few miles of the Kosovo border where UNHCR and NGOs are already operational. Globally, NATO is seeking to deploy 8000 troops to the border area ostensibly to support humanitarian operations.

James Orbinski, M.D., president of the MSF International Council, said that “support for humanitarian operations must not be a rationale for future military deployment capacity. While immediate NATO logistical support has been vital in this crisis, NATO militaries and member states should not be running, or be seen to be running refugee camps. If this perception exists, camps cannot be seen as neutral humanitarian zones and may be at security risk in the future.” Dr. Orbinski added that “immediate logistical support from non-humanitarian actors is certainly needed in this crisis, but it must be at the request and under the coordination of UN Agencies. Otherwise such support risks being seen as support or preparation for military actions which could put the refugees at security risk in the long-run. The simple fact is that NATO is a military actor that is at war. NATO is not a neutral and impartial humanitarian actor.”

Dr. Orbinski said further that “refugee needs exist today, but will also exist tomorrow. We are extremely concerned that immediate military efforts to provide humanitarian assistance will jeopardize the long term neutral and impartial character of humanitarian assistance in the region.” He said finally that “UN Agencies absolutely must now be more active in setting humanitarian priorities, in carefully requesting support from non-humanitarian actors such as NATO, and in coordinating with neutral and impartial NGOs.”

According to official figures, over 250,000 refugees are inside Albania. MSF is currently assisting refugees in the border region of Kukes. MSF is also assisting refugees in Fier and a transit-camp in Korce. MSF is also present in Macedonia and Montenegro. Before the forced migration of Kosovars, MSF provided medical assistance to internally displaced persons inside Kosovo at Pristina, Prizren, and Pec.

For further information or interviews, please contact Bas Tielens or Amaia Espanza at 038-2027761 or 00-871.761.847249.
Background

Fundamentally, the crisis in the Kosovo region is a political crisis with direct military consequences and possible future military implications. It is also a political crisis with clear and self-evident humanitarian consequences and possible future implications.

According to official figures, approximately 450,000 people have lost their homes, and their rights in their country. They have been forcibly expelled from Kosovo across borders to neighboring states. Yet, as victims of political crisis, they still have rights as refugees. They have a right to political asylum. They have a right to protection and security. And they have a right to humanitarian assistance that is neutral and impartial. The UNHCR was created and is mandated in international law to ensure and protect the basic rights of refugees in precisely this kind of political crisis. Beyond the refugees expelled from Kosovo, there are still approximately 1 million ethnic Albanians inside Kosovo who have no access to humanitarian presence or assistance.

At this time in the current crisis, the reality is that the sheer scale of immediate humanitarian need has meant that military logistical support from NATO militaries has been, and is needed to meet basic emergency needs. NATO militaries and member states are also building and seeking to manage refugee camps in Albania, as they are doing in Macedonia. While UNHCR and NGOs are operational at the Albania-Kosovo border, NATO is planning to deploy 8,000 troops to the Albania, ostensibly for humanitarian purposes. However, the political crisis means that NATO is continuing air-strikes and there may yet be further military escalation.

In war, perceptions matter as much as bullets and food, and if wrongly managed can put refugees at increased security risk. Humanitarian assistance to civilians in war must be neutral and impartial, and must be seen as neutral and impartial to the causes and conditions of war, and to the actors in war. NATO is one such actor in the current conflict. NATO is at war. It is not a neutral and impartial humanitarian actor. This means that military logistic support for humanitarian assistance must be kept as far away as possible from NATO’s current or potential military role. Otherwise the security of refugees in camps may be at risk. It also means that refugee camps and humanitarian priorities must be run and managed not by non-humanitarian actors who are at war, but by UNHCR, who must coordinate with independent and neutral NGOs.

In the past 17 days UNHCR has not been a strong and assertive humanitarian leader. It is failing to lead according to its humanitarian mandate. UNHCR is not strongly coordinating the humanitarian relief efforts, nor fulfilling its protection role by for example, systematically registering refugees in Albania. In Macedonia, an estimated 100,000 refugees sat in “no man’s land” without political asylum, and with limited access to humanitarian assistance. Many were then forcibly deported and separated from their families. In Montenegro, UNHCR has only five representatives on the ground, and is not coordinating effectively, or systematically registering refugees.

As a humanitarian organization, MSF is deeply concerned not only with the safety, security and protection of the rights of refugees in the regions surrounding Kosovo. It is also deeply concerned with the humanitarian needs and security of people inside Kosovo whose status is uncertain at best, and of Serb civilians inside Serbia where NATO bombing is underway. Humanitarian action is more than logistics. In terms of access to all civilian populations at risk in this political crisis, the neutrality and impartiality of humanitarian action is vital, and so too is clear assertive leadership from UNHCR.

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