Letter from Kosovo from Joelle Tanguy, Executive Director, MSF-USA, August 12, 1998

MSF has been working in Kosovo since 1993, providing medical supplies to local clinics, training health personnel, and improving water and sanitation systems. Since fighting broke out in Kosovo in the spring of 1998, MSF has been operating mobile clinics to reach displaced populations and others who are unable to gain access to health care.

"The latest offensive of Serb forces in Kosovo has targeted mostly villages and small towns, forcing populations to flee into the hills. Previous attacks, in recent months, had forced families to take refuge in other villages, in the houses of relatives. But the latest offensive, so widespread, seems to have displaced too many to be accommodated in private homes. According to some sources, between 50,000 and 70,000 have been displaced by this latest phase of the conflict, declared two weeks ago. And according to UNHCR, the total number of IDPs in Kosovo is reaching 200,000, a tenth of the population!

"MSF teams, despite tremendous difficulty at checkpoints, have been able, by insistence and obstinance, to gain access to groups of displaced people hiding in the hills, and to be a firsthand witness to their tragedy. For a large part of the Drenica region, the formula is the same: villagers escape into the hills as the villages were attacked, mostly by shelling; Serbian police forces take control of the shelled villages. In many of these villages, fields and houses are set ablaze not only by the shelling but apparently days after the shelling too, possibly intentionally by arson, reportedly to prevent the displaced populations return, a sad reminder of the practices adopted in the Bosnia ethnic cleansing.

"Some families in hiding are even scared to cook as they fear that smoke could cause them to be located and shelled by Serb police. So they cook at night, under tree cover. They have very little food, but some have brought a minimum supply to the hills. Often families we find have been twice displaced: their original village was attacked in recent months, and then the relatives' homes, in which they sought shelter, came under attack in the last offensive.

"Our work is essential as we are the only organization able to send medical teams into the affected and controlled areas. We also assist the populations with basic supplies such as collapsible water containers and purification tablets, plastic sheeting and mattresses, we carry out consultations on the spot and/or to give supplies to the displaced medical doctors and health professionals (also in hiding with their displaced community). Many pathologies are related to the quality of water found in the hills (diarrhea) and to mental health (high blood pressure, mental trauma etc...) More worrying are the pregnant mothers and the serious cases needing evacuations to hospitals. MSF has started to carry out these evacuations, with a major limitation: no fighting-age man can be transported in our vehicles. In the weeks to come, the threat of rains is a concern, with the related need for shelter and the risks of respiratory infections. And of course, we all dread the continuation, and likely escalation of the fighting.

"MSF plans to immediately expand the program of mobile teams to expand its reach throughout the hills and valleys of the affected region."