Amsterdam, 20 April 1999

Deportees from Kosovo.

Since weeks we witness the expulsion from Kosovo of the entire population of 1.8 million persons. Albanian Kosovars are systematically being deported. Serb soldiers and policemen knock on doors and order the people to leave their houses and farms. Identity papers and other documents are systematically taken from the people. Young men are separated from the women and children, who are ordered to leave instantly. Their houses are put on fire. The fate of the men remains unknown but it is feared they have been murdered. This policy repeats itself house after house, village after village, valley after valley, region after region. By thousands the expelled cross the borders into Macedonia, Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina and Montenegro. Some have walked for weeks and are totally exhausted. They report outright atrocities such as (mass) killings, rape, physical mutilation and other war crimes and crimes against humanity.

This process is called ethnic cleansing. The ‘fortunate’ ones reach safety in neighboring countries where the deportees are welcomed as refugees. In the Kosovo context the words ethnic cleansing and refugees are misleading. It disguises the real nature and scope of the events. Ethnic cleansing is another word for mass murder and deportation. And a refugee does not equal a deportee. The term refugee implies a more or less individual choice whereas deportees are bluntly ordered and sent away. It is precisely this notion of choice, presently absent in Kosovo, which touches a different emotional and rational nerve. We, and (our) politicians feel, think and act differently once confronted with the mass murder and/or deportation of 90% of the Kosovo populace rather than another refugee crisis. Deportation invokes a moral and legal obligation on the side of the international community to intervene.

Refusing to speak of deportees to a certain degree justifies the present political inertia. Meanwhile it covers up the most gruesome and despicable human rights abuses. Bernard Kouchner and Emma Bonino, amongst others, have already been more honest by proclaiming deportee status. Next to the humanitarian efforts MSF should also pay attention to the context. MSF must stop fueling the confusing political rhetoric and, as a ‘témoin’ stick to the facts.

Those expelled from Kosovo are deportees. From a moral point of view deportees need even more drastic and far-reaching assistance and protection than ‘ordinary’ refugees.

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