To: All director generals, all sections
+ all Directors of operations
From: MSF Skopje
14th May, 1999
Re: Kosovo lobbying/tempoignage

Dear all,

Over the past few weeks, all of us have been too busy dealing with the immediate response to the Kosovo refugee crisis to spend time reflecting on what has been happening, and what may be in the pipeline for the refugees in the months to come.

MSF Tirana and we in Skopje think that it is really important for MSF to clarify in our own minds, among other things:
* what it really means to work in NATO’s shadow and what it may hold in stock for the future of independent humanitarian aid
* what the most immediate threats are to the refugees and what should be done
* what is acceptable and what is not with regard to the future 'pressed' repatriation programme into Kosovo

If we could agree that we share those major concerns, we could try and work together to shift the current terms of the humanitarian agenda (or at least not leave the field open to NATO alone).

Though there are some differences in emphasis between Albania and Macedonia, our overall concerns are:

* There are considerable differences in access to assistance and protection between different groups of refugees within each country, and across the region. Refugees in the community, most of whom are still unregistered, are extremely vulnerable. MSF has first-hand evidence that the aid is not reaching a sizeable proportion of the refugees in Albania (see Epicentre report).
* Political promises have been made to the refugees that NATO would soon ensure their safe return. Growing international acceptance of a 'pressured return' to Kosovo is extremely worrying and should be resisted. Even UNHCR seems to believe it will be inevitable.
* In all the ongoing programmes of refugee relocation and transfer (from Macedonia to Albania, and within Albania itself) the refugees are not receiving full and accurate information about their future living conditions and their long-term status and rights. What no one has said yet is that the refugees who choose not to move are entitled to adequate standards of protection and care. There is evidence (at least in Macedonia) that the denial of such provisions (or simply really shitty conditions, coupled with misinformation on what is available in Albania) will be used as an incentive to relocate.
* NATO forces have been widely portrayed as the driving force behind humanitarian efforts in the region. Not only does the humanitarian role played by one of the parties to the conflict a serious threat to the necessary impartiality and neutrality of humanitarian efforts here and elsewhere, but NATO has also proven to be less than effective in meeting its stated humanitarian aims when not effectively coordinated by a humanitarian agency with the appropriate mandate and expertise, such as UNHCR. (We have evidence in Macedonia of NATO contingents providing inappropriate aid - do you have similar stories in Albania?). It is crucial to the effectiveness and impartiality of the humanitarian effort that donor governments meet UNHCR’s urgent financial needs and allow it to fulfill its independent protection role.

Note: For your information, a task force is being set up jointly by UNHCR, the EU and OFDAP to plan for winterisation and the refugees’ return to Kosovo (McNamara’s initiative). NATO is being drawn into the plan as the provider of security and logistical support. Operation Glorious Return? (on this, see Joelle Tanguy’s note on her meeting with the US State Dpt)
* The political emphasis on the imminent return of the refugees to Kosovo may hold back key preparedness programmes in host countries, such as winterisation.

Next steps

1. For MSF directors to discuss and endorse the concerns above and clearly brief the whole MSF network.
2. Document the practical evidence of the issues listed above to
Support temognage activities (this evidence exists, it just needs to be written and edited in a suitable format).
1. Liaise with HCR at the highest level to assure them of MSF’s support. Campaign for support for HCR’s protection and coordination role.
4. Put pressure on other NGOs and major donors to discuss the real threats to humanitarian principles posed by the growing involvement of the military. We have to break the myth (widely held within NGOs) that NATO is best because it has the biggest trucks. We must explain why humanitarian aid is worthless if not independent. (That said, MSF Tirana)
5. Conduct a press campaign on the same issue
6. Throughout, raise awareness in a systematic way of the fact that MSF is not NATO funded, and why (it is still not widely known - so we are just another NGO as far as many governments and media are concerned).

Issues for future consideration:
1. As MSF Tirana rightly points out, all the refugees one speaks to say that the only thing they want to do is go back as soon as possible, so our concerns over ‘pressured return’ may sound unnecessarily paranoid. However, the country they want to return to will have changed beyond recognition, and there is no guarantee yet that all refugees will be able to return to their former homes, or even their region of origin, in safety. Refugee protection is there for a reason.
2. MSF Tirana also makes a good tactical point: when making a strong case for civilian leadership of humanitarian efforts, we must be aware of the less than perfect record of the 125 or so NGOs now swarming around Albania achieving very little of substance.

Looking forward to your comments.
All the best,
Michiel Hofman