Subject: press release

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Hi,

Please find below the press statement, which we will hand out to journos during Kofi Annan's briefing. An army of journos are following the secretary-general - which doesn't necessarily mean we'll have a better chance to get our message through, but at least we have to give it a try.

You may find not much new in the statement. Then again, we do hint at the conditions in case of a return of the refugees to Kosovo (without accusing anyone of having done anything wrong YET in that matter; please stick to the careful phrasing of that point).

You can reach me on +389 70 252 180; please keep that number at hand for the coming weeks.

Arrividerci,
Erwin

STATEMENT

MSF calls for effective and principled UN leadership over Kosovo refugee relief effort

Skopje 19th May, 1999. The international medical aid agency Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is deeply concerned about the lack of refugee protection and aid coordination in the international response to the Kosovo crisis to date.

In a meeting with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in Skopje, aid agencies working in Macedonia have delivered a message of support to the United Nations in general, and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in particular, in their efforts to set up a more
effective, and more principled, leadership over the humanitarian effort.

"This crisis is unique in that western governments, which usually support UNHCR financially and otherwise, have wanted to take a direct part in humanitarian efforts as part of their overall military activities," says Tim Pitt, the MSF Head of Mission in Macedonia. "In doing so, they have undermined UNHCR's ability to lead and to provide independent protection and assistance to refugees. Refugees need a well-funded, and politically robust, UNHCR, that is able to protect their rights effectively, now and in the future."

NATO forces have been widely portrayed as the driving force behind humanitarian efforts in the region. That one of the parties to the conflict, i.e. NATO, is acting as a humanitarian agency poses a serious threat to the necessary impartiality and neutrality of humanitarian efforts in the region and beyond. It is crucial to the effectiveness and impartiality of the humanitarian effort that donor governments allow UNHCR to fullfil its independent humanitarian coordination role.

Meanwhile, 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. The refugees who choose not to move are entitled to adequate standards of protection and care, but there is growing evidence that the threat of denial of such provisions may be used as an incentive to relocate.

Political promises have been made to the refugees that NATO would soon ensure their safe return. MSF stresses that also in the case of repatriation, UNHCR should be - and be perceived to be - the leading agency and safeguard that international humanitarian law is being adhered to. This includes ensuring that repatriation is on a voluntary basis and that no measures are taken that would result in a pressured return of the refugees to Kosovo.

For its aid mission in the Balkans, MSF is declining all funding from governments who have a military involvement in the conflict.

For further information, contact Erwin van 't Land (MSF Skopje) on +389 70 252 810.