MSF calls on governments, particularly from NATO countries, to support UN leadership for refugee relief effort and stresses the need for registration and protection

Kukes, 20th May, 1999. The international medical aid agency Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is deeply concerned about the lack of refugee protection and support for aid co-ordination in the international response to the Kosovo crisis to date.

In a meeting with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in Skopje yesterday and in Tirana this morning, aid agencies working in Macedonia and Albania delivered a message of support to the United Nations in general, and to 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.

"Western governments usually support the UNHCR financially, politically and diplomatically to ensure protection and assistance to refugees, but in this crisis they have waited for the military to take a direct part in humanitarian efforts as part of their overall military activities," says Christopher Stokes, the MSF Head of Mission in Albania. "By doing this, refugees have received varying standards of protection and assistance and UNHCR's ability to lead and ensure these standards or protection and assistance to refugees has been undermined. Refugees need a well-funded, and politically robust, UNHCR, that is able to protect their rights effectively, now and in the future."

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 and support the UNHCR to fulfil its independent humanitarian co-ordination role, working with NGO's.

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

Almost two months since the war began, there is still no registration of refugees, which means they have no status and no rights. This also means that it is very difficult to ensure that refugees are identified and targeted for assistance and protection. Registration of refugees must be a priority, especially as refugees are being relocated on a daily basis. MSF is also concerned about the protection of refugees in camps (10-15% of all Kosovo refugees in Albania) and the remaining refugees who are scattered throughout collective centres and families (55% hosted with Albanian families in Kukes alone). HCR must take the lead on protection and registration of refugees.

For its aid mission in the Balkans, MSF is declining all direct or indirect funding from governments who have a military involvement in the conflict. The UNHCR/MSF camp was the first camp in Kukes to be built and managed by an NGO with the HCR, and shelters 7,000 refugees.

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PRESS RELEASE

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

During a meeting in Skopje with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, aid agencies working in Macedonia 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," said 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 fulfill 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.