MSF calls for swift and coordinated action on booby traps and mines in Kosovo

Pristina, 19 June 1999. The international medical aid agency Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) is deeply concerned about incidents involving booby traps and mines hidden in private homes in Kosovo. As internally displaced and refugees start returning from their hiding places and from neighbouring countries, MSF fears that the number of such incidents will increase rapidly over the coming days and weeks. There are also grave dangers for those who stayed in their houses and who now for the first time in months dare go outdoors. Therefore, MSF calls upon United Nations agencies, non-governmental organisations involved in demining and mine awareness campaigns, and K-FOR in particular, to coordinate their efforts and immediately make clearance of booby traps and mines a high priority.

Over the past four days, MSF teams have treated booby trap victims in villages and transported them to Pristina Hospital. Some of these devices were deliberately left behind in order to inflict injury upon returning refugees. With an increasing stream of returnees in the near future, there is sufficient reason to fear that many will lose limbs, or their lives, when they finally get home.

Christopher Stokes, MSF coordinator in Pristina: "We find ourselves on the receiving end every day. We treat people, transport them to the hospital, and we hear their stories. They tell us how they had already been back home for days, cleaned the house, brought back their family and then stepped on a mine in their garden. Or about how they opened their front door for the first time in months and ended up with shrapnel all over their body. As more and more refugees return, more and more people will become victims of booby traps. If we do not act now, the consequences could well be serious and massive."

Stokes adds, "NATO promised to make sure that refugees could return home safely. This goes beyond demilitarisation and clearance of the main roads. Providing safety should not end at the gates of people's private properties."

MSF strongly urges that organisations involved in demining and mine awareness campaigns take this reality into account and respond to it without delay. This means that they have to coordinate their work, set up comprehensive information campaigns, develop systems for identifying high risk areas and organise rapid demining there.

On the back of this press release you will find a selection of incidents with booby traps from the last four days.

For more information or interviews: