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Press Release

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MEDICAL PERSONNEL TARGETED IN KOSOVO
Medical Supplies Burned as Thousands Hide in Forests

Brussels, October 9, 1998 — At a press conference in Brussels today, the international medical relief agency Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) voiced concern for the thousands of people in Kosovo facing a cold winter with few supplies and too little access to medical care.

Two persons of the medical team just out from Kosovo spoke out against the increasing difficulties humanitarian agencies and local doctors face when trying to help those in need. Medical personnel are targeted and medical supplies are deliberately burned or destroyed.

"When we visited the building where we had been seeing patients in the village of Glogovc, we found that all the medical supplies had been burnt. All that was left was a pile of ashes and some metal tweezers," said Keith Ursel, Canadian-American emergency coordinator, after visiting the village on the 28th of September.

The population of Kosovo had enjoyed a good standard of health care but they are afraid and now there are enormous medical needs. These needs range from war wounds requiring immediate surgery and regular dressings to chronic illnesses such as diabetes and asthma. Those who do reach medical treatment on a local level are afraid to be transferred away to the larger referral hospitals even if they need the treatment.

"The war wounded are not the only ones in danger and who fear for their lives. Women with complicated pregnancies, asthmatics, and diabetics are also afraid and at risk if they don't get medicine or care," said Dr. Vincent Janssen, just back from Kosovo.

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Civilians requiring medical treatment are not the only ones at risk. Medical personnel, who bring hope and assistance to the population, are specifically targeted in the fighting. On the 25th of September, a doctor who worked closely with Doctors Without Borders, Dr Lec, was arrested, tortured, and killed. "We are worried about the high number of medical personnel who are reported arrested, who have disappeared or who have been forced to flee," said Keith Ursel, Doctors Without Borders emergency coordinator. "These people are suffering so much, not only are there no medicines to help them, but now even those who care for them are being targeted" he concluded.

Winter is approaching and temperatures are lowering to dangerous levels in Kosovo. Around 200,000 people have been displaced, of which tens of thousands are living in the forests with little assistance.

Doctors Without Borders has been running health programs in Kosovo since 1992. These last few months, the organization has concentrated its aid on the areas where there is fighting. Three mobile teams are now working around Pec, Drenica, and Prizren, each doing seeing about 100-300 patients a day among the displaced populations. For security reasons, the Doctors Without Borders teams have been temporarily reduced.

For further information or to set up an interview with Keith Ursel, please contact Barbara Kancelbaum, 212-655-3763, or Kris Torgeson, 212-655-3765. Photographs are also available.

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