To Bastien, Vincent, Graziella, Tim, Bas and all the MSF volunteers in Kosovo.

Paris, 17.11.98

After having briefed Bas here in Paris, I feel the necessity to share some feelings and comments with all of you.

One of Bas tasks would be to rebuild confidence with the team about its ability to control the process of advocacy and the use of our informations by the media.

It is easy to read between the lines and understand that this is directly linked with the "bad experience" of last October.

I think we have to be careful with this "never again approach" as it may not lead to a real improvement of our work if it is too much directed at building safeguards and guarantees.

So I think it is important to agree on the diagnosis before deciding on the treatment and so defining the main priority of Bas' work.

1- When it comes to media management, the word "control" is a false one. It gives wrong security feelings.

Either you give information to the media, either you don't. But no one will never be able to control from A to Z what happens with. You can also establish embargo on information until a specific date. But even with this, you have the question of morning or evening newspapers in Europe or the US that prove that an information cannot be issued exactly at the same time everywhere around the world.

When you look at what happened at the press conference, you understand that we were led to say more that what we wish (at the press conference) and that we were led to speak at a "wrong" time we have not chosen (the day of the deadline for airstrike in Le Monde) because we, as MSF, were too late anyway to say what we had to, on Kosovo.

- If we had maintained a flux of informations to the media since February or July;
- If we had clarified our position on what concerns us and what does not concern us in this crisis (air strikes, Nato, Human rights observers, UCK, serbian police and military activities, respect of the civilians, their vital properties and the relief, respect of the medical duties ...);

then we would not have found ourselves in such a difficult situation at the last minute.

Golden rule

The less you give to the media, the more they put you under pressure, and the more they tend to fill the blank by extrapolating or misunderstanding what you say.

2- We cannot be proud of this advocacy operation but at least it saved us from having been totally silent on war crimes.

Now our real challenge is to make sure that we will not be in such a position in the future.

I think that it is a waste of time to focus Bas' work on how to control media, to establish new communications procedures that will "protect us" more, to decide whether or not Le monde is not any more a reliable newspaper and to ban such a newspaper from our list (why not the Washington post?). Because at the headquarters level, communication people are usually not unprofessional.

If we want to avoid the repetition of what happened, we have to take a proactive profile in terms of informations rather than a controlling attitude.

We have to concentrate on the gathering of informations relevant to our programs and relevant to the fate of the population.

We have to identify the new problems that will arise in this phase of resettlement and distribution of international assistance (to whom, through which channels, under what conditions, and decide if it suits or not our own humanitarian standards and ethical duties...).

We have to keep journalists informed regularly about all this and not only on the spot of crisis.

We are accountable on what we are doing to the public that gives us money, and to the victims that we hope to protect.
We are not a human rights organization, so we are not collecting any kind of information on what happens to the people.

We are only accountable on:
- the way humanitarian law is or is not respected by each,
- the way humanitarian activities are made possible or not by each.

This is a heavy work to do. If we want to give us the best chance to succeed in it, it will be better to make sure that Bas can concentrate on this only.

I remain sincerely yours and ready for any further discussion.

Francoise Bouchet-Saulnier.