Dear all:

after discussion with many of you today, and given the major changes on the last 24 hours in the Kosovo crisis, I have prepared a draft press release for discussion at the teleconference.

Please read the attached file (there are footnotes, so you will need to print it out in order to read them). I recognize that things can change overnight, so don't hesitate to be critical. We can discuss during the teleconference.

Best,

James Orbinski
DRAFT PRESS RELEASE
April 4, 1999
MSF Calls for Immediate Humanitarian Protection and Space in Kosovo and Surrounding Region

Given recent events in Kosovo and its surrounding region, Medecins Sans Frontieres calls for:

1) The immediate consideration of direct action to protect civilians and IDPs inside Kosovo, including the possible use of ground forces to ensure safety of civilians and prevention of ethnic cleansing;

2) An immediate separation of humanitarian space from military objectives, and an improvement in logistical support and coordination for humanitarian assistance in Macedonia, Montenegro, and Albania. Humanitarian action should be coordinated by internationally recognized independent and impartial agencies (like UNHCR and ICRC), not by NATO;

3) and the immediate and unconditional respect for international humanitarian law inside and around Kosovo.

Serb forces have launched a campaign of ethnic cleansing inside Kosovo. Journalists were expelled, and humanitarian workers are virtually absent inside Kosovo. Ethnic cleansing has been accelerated in recent days by NATO bombing. At this time ethnic cleansing of a massive and systematic scale is taking place. Over 260,000 people have fled Kosovo in the last week alone. Massacres are taking place inside Kosovo, but their scale and scope is as yet unclear. It is clear that ethnic cleansing will continue. There is no protection of civilian populations. This is contrary to any and all basic tenets of international humanitarian law.

Outside Kosovo in neighboring Macedonia², Montenegro and Albania³ humanitarian assistance is unacceptably late and failing to meet the basic survival needs of refugees and internally displaced persons. NATO military actions and objectives mixed with NATO declarations to provide humanitarian assistance are hampering effective humanitarian space. Humanitarian space includes the ability of impartial and independent actors to freely access, assess monitor and deliver humanitarian assistance. At this time civilians lack basic food, water, shelter and sanitation and are at increased risk of exposure and epidemic disease. Internationally recognized independent and impartial humanitarian agencies (like UNHCR and ICRC) should be designated as lead agencies to coordinate humanitarian actions. This is not the legitimate responsibility or role of NATO.

Humanitarian action is failing in Kosovo and the surrounding region on two fronts: assistance is ineffective and protection is non-existent. There is a profound risk of even greater death and suffering for civilian populations in the coming days and weeks. With a view to possible future developments in the Kosovo region, MSF is prepared to engage and meet humanitarian needs where they arise. Protection of civilian populations from ethnic cleansing and independent and impartial humanitarian space are absolutely necessary at this time.

END

² In Macedonia global coordination among humanitarian actors is poor, and hampered by confusion between NATO and UNHCR dealing separately with government actors. This is made worse by the fact that authorities did not allow humanitarian actors to make adequate emergency preparations in the previous weeks.

³ In Albania insecurity and faltering coordination in the face of a massive influx of refugees is creating a bottleneck in delivery of humanitarian assistance.