

Brussels, 16 October 1999

“Médecins Sans Frontières constitute embodiment of European solidarity”, says Commissioner Nielson

On behalf of the European Commission, Commissioner Poul Nielson would like to congratulate Médecins Sans Frontières on receiving this year's Nobel Peace Prize. The award is well merited, and the recognition of an organisation whose dedication and principled professionalism has in recent years made “MSF” virtually synonymous with effective international medical relief. The timing of the award is particularly poignant, coming in the same week as the murder of two UN officials in Burundi. This stark juxtaposition serves to underline the fact that the work of relief agencies, however competent, courageous and committed, cannot provide a substitute for long-term, structural engagement in the political crises that are the root cause of humanitarian disasters.

It is in this context that, in addition to developing an efficient operational response capacity, Médecins Sans Frontières (and indeed the NGO movement as a whole) has also played a particularly dynamic role in alerting and mobilising public opinion. MSF – which now has active sections in several EU Member States – thus constitutes an embodiment of, and conduit for, the solidarity of the people of Europe in the face of the unacceptable human suffering caused by conflict and displacement, particularly in the developing world.

Through its Humanitarian Office (ECHO), the Commission has been an active and constant supporter not only of the MSF family (by some distance the largest single NGO recipient of ECHO funding), but also of a wide range of other humanitarian NGOs and international agencies. In 1998, the Commission funded humanitarian actions in 70 countries through financing decisions totalling some € 518 million; in the wake of the Kosovo crisis, this figure is set to rise substantially in 1999.

The Commission intends to build further on its partnership with MSF and other NGOs and relief agencies that have achieved similarly high standards in other fields of humanitarian endeavour, while at the same time working with the international community towards the durable resolution of the conflicts and crises that continue to create a need for large-scale humanitarian interventions in many parts of the world.