

MSF Belgium / France in Croatia

Introduction

I came to Zagreb with 600 kg of urgent medical equipment. "Human Resources" asked me to assess the situation and give a hand during 10 days before coming back or taking the decision to stay. So my approach of the situation is that of a stand-by MSFer / observer.

Situation

The first obvious observation was the **complexity** of the ex-Yugoslav situation. The Croatian military opposition was made out of different groups each with a different political message and each having different revendications.

Secondly, all international organisations present have **clearly chosen the Croatian side** in the conflict except for ICRC and MSF.

The scheduled Maastricht summit and the scheduled Reunion of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Twelve made it impossible to officially recognize Croatia for any European nation; But as we found out this "de jure" recognition is not excluding a de facto recognition by bringing **massive aid** to the Croatian side. The history Croatia has in common with especially Italy, Austria, Germany and Hungary immediately indicates the main donators of assistance and aid.

All important humanitarian supports being given to Croatia is due to a clear "choose of side" and **parallel diplomatic negotiations** by historically to Croatia related nations and even persons.

The presence of these humanitarian colleagues in Zagreb makes it for MSF almost impossible to act.

- A) The budget we have at our disposal is neglectable compared to what others bring in.
- B) The paralysis of the "official" negotiations can not be avoided by us to lack of parallel - circuit - contacts.
- C) In such an emotionally stressing situation where Croatia considers itself supported by history the "apolitical - agnostic - aphilosophical" approach of MSF has not a single meaning (if not a ridiculous one for our 110% politically involved counterparts) - and our presence on the other side is not at all important in this nationalistic happening - same for ICRC.

Apart from the unimportant neutrality we want and have to keep up to, MSF is badly perceived in Zagreb.

The former general coordinator who refuses to toast with the Minister of Health; the coordinator of the Vukovar convoy who doesn't show up at a final meeting with the Ministry of Health and a newspaper article claiming that Vukovar would still be in Croatian hands if it wasn't for the MSF - EC convoy that paralysed all strategic and military movements on this side of the front, are but few examples of the poor image we have.

All this makes MSF rather tolerated than appreciated in Zagreb, and this perception is definitely not going to give us the so important security guarantees we need to enter the regions of direct military confrontations.

The financially powerful humanitarian agents (e.g. Souveräner Malteser Kreuz Ritter Order) with access to parallel diplomacy, with the local authorities for the logistic support seem to be totally covering the needs in Croatia.

Our presence can come up with some minor positive distributions but these do not justify the dangers to which MSF is exposed when doing so.

Stefaan De Wolf

Zagreb, 9th December 1991