

speaker's corner



Why Médecins Sans Frontières has pulled out of Afghanistan

by Anouk Delafortrie

A nametag, left on an empty white board in an empty office in Kabul. Handwritten in big curvy letters, it reads: Hélène MSF-H. The tag belonged to Hélène de Beir, who was killed on 2 June 2004 with four colleagues a few hundred kilometres from the office she used to pass by on her way to and from her project in Badghis province.

A few weeks after her murder Hélène's parents addressed MSF's General Assembly with a dignity, courage and wisdom almost superhuman for a couple who have lost a 29-year old daughter to an ideal. It is an ideal that almost seems anachronistic in today's polarised world, where the military disguise themselves as humanitarians and humanitarians snuggle up to those with a political or military agenda in return for steady funding.

Kenny Gluck, director of the project in which Hélène was working, believes firmly that "MSF is not willing to turn into an armed agency of medical providers. We believe in the humanitarian ideal that going unarmed into an area of conflict, trying to save lives, trying to alleviate suffering, is a reaffirmation of human dignity." Eight volunteers and many more national staff have been killed since MSF's creation in 1971. "It is the most horrible thing for us to endure", says Gluck. "Humanitarian assistance cannot be provided in a way which is entirely safe. By going to Somalia, to Congo or Afghanistan, our volunteers accept risks as part of their engagement with the people who are facing far greater risks. What we have to ask for is a framework of respect for the safety of our

volunteers and staff. In Afghanistan at the moment, with the killings, lack of governmental follow-up and explicit Taliban threats against MSF it is no longer there."

It would be dishonest to blame the killings on the coalition forces and the confusion which the US has sown by calling NGOs 'force multipliers' and 'members of a team against terror'. Responsibility for the killings of Hélène and her colleagues lies squarely with those who ordered them and carried them out. However, by embracing the concept of humanitarian aid as part of their broader strategy, Western politicians are spreading the idea that humanitarian agencies are no longer independent and neutral.

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Local commanders, extremist groups and coalition forces all profit by abusing the humanitarian aid effort. This is not a new phenomenon. What is new is the scale of the manipulation. This is perhaps exacerbated by the arrival of dozens of new NGOs, which are not necessarily committed to remaining independent from donors or neutral with regard to warring parties. This chaotic and rapid growth, along with the multiplication of UN peacekeeping missions, has left many spectators unable to distinguish between groups of armed and humanitarian actors.

In Afghanistan understanding and support for the great range of agencies working there is very limited. Ordinary Afghans describe the well-paid foreigners who flash past in \$75,000 Toyota Land Cruisers as the 'Toyota Taliban'. Coalition forces dis-

tribute leaflets in southern Afghanistan, with a picture of a young girl carrying a bag of wheat, which warns people that future aid supplies depend on providing information about the Taliban and al-Qa'ida. US and NATO soldiers perform non-military duties in civilian clothing and many NGOs are almost entirely dependent on US funding. No wonder that ordinary Afghans are confused.

There may not be much we can do to clear up the confusion but we owe it to Hélène, Fasil, Besmillah, Egil and Pim to press the Afghan government to prosecute their killers and the current climate of impunity. We have to press the Taliban to retract the accusation that MSF serves US interests and to withdraw threats against those who work independently and impartially to help vulnerable Afghans. At the highest political levels we must pressure the coalition, the UN and the NGO community to stop all acts which contribute to the confusion of identities and undermine respect for independent humanitarian action.

We must stay faithful to the ideal we all shared with Hélène. We recall the first steps MSF doctors and nurses took into Afghanistan in 1980, by mule train through gorges and over mountains, defying snow and wind, to be able to reach people cut off from help. Our work continued uninterrupted for 24 years despite mujahadiin wars, Taliban rule and Operation Enduring Freedom. We hope that one day MSF will be able to return to the side of the Afghan people.

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