

**ON THE MEDICAL
FRONTLINES**

HUMANITARIAN ACTION IN CONFLICT



Somalia, 2006 © Espen Rasmussen

“Humanitarian action is based on the conviction that ordinary people caught in conflict and crisis, whoever and wherever they may be, deserve to be spared from the excesses of violence and to receive lifesaving assistance that is impartial, neutral, and free from political or religious agendas.

It has a limited, one could even say modest, ambition: to seek out those in the gravest danger, alleviate suffering, and help as many of them as possible survive. This is the simple and extremely powerful idea at the core of what Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has been doing for more than 35 years.

Civilians are subject to unrelenting violence and discrimination in conflict. Think of the millions of people forced from their homes in Colombia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Chad, Somalia, Sri Lanka, and Sudan struggling to survive and facing uncertain futures. Think of the Hmong refugees in Thailand who talk of suicide rather than face forced repatriation to Laos. Think of the Iraqis subjected to unimaginable violence on a daily basis and with little or no medical care.

The principles of humanitarian action require that we push for access to those we cannot reach; that we provide lifesaving medical assistance to those we can; and that we bear witness to the plight of people trapped in conflict in the absolute conviction that there must be a space for humanity in war. If it is true to itself, humanitarian action should not only give tangible help, it should also be a constant thorn in the side of those responsible for atrocities and those who choose to ignore them.”

*Nicolas de Torrenté
Executive Director, MSF-USA*

