



Opening Statement Isabel Simpson, Executive Director Médecins Sans Frontières – Doctors Without Borders, Ireland

– Oireachtas Foreign Affairs & Defence Committee 25 January 2022

Good afternoon, Chairperson, Senators, Deputies, ladies and gentlemen – Médecins Sans Frontières – Doctors Without Borders would like to sincerely thank the Committee for giving us this opportunity to present to you some critical humanitarian crises that we are responding to. In doing so, we will highlight urgent humanitarian concerns that MSF is encountering through our medical work.

Last year was a major milestone in MSF's history as we reached our 50th Anniversary. However, in many ways we felt there is little to celebrate, as the global needs in humanitarian medical action have only increased during this time. Major conflicts rage in Syria, Yemen and the Tigray region of Ethiopia. Globally there are increased numbers of refugees, displaced and vulnerable populations – an increasing impact of climate change on communities in the Global South and increasing attacks on healthcare facilities and workers in conflict-affected settings where MSF is present. In South Sudan, DRC and Central African Republic re-occurring outbreaks of preventable diseases such as malaria and cholera continue to cause high levels of mortality.

In addition, we have all been battling the global Covid pandemic for more than two years and the new inequalities that it has created in access to vaccines, treatments and other medical technologies. An issue MSF teams responding to Covid in different parts of the world can see as being a major challenge in bringing the Pandemic under control (I know that this committee has looked at it before and we would like to see this important issue of Vaccine equity remain on its agenda).

This afternoon we will update you on two key contexts that are high in our priorities at present – Afghanistan, where MSF has worked for over three decades; and where protracted conflict has given way to a crisis involving a healthcare system which is entirely aid-dependent. With a population now experiencing food insecurity; increasingly high levels of acute malnutrition are being reported from our medical facilities on the ground. As you will hear, one of the great risks for the health system in Afghanistan is collapse due to lack of international support.

The movement of people from one place to another has always occurred, but since 2015 MSF has borne witness to and assisted people affected by an acute humanitarian crisis, worsened by inhumane migration policies at Europe's borders and elsewhere. Whatever the drivers of migration may be – war, conflict, persecution, climate change or economics – migrants deserve to be treated with humanity and dignity. We last addressed our work on Migration to this Committee in 2018 and

regrettably not much has changed since then – MSF still operates a Search and Rescue ship in the Central Mediterranean, where many lives are being lost and where people are being returned to Libya, by the Libyan Coastguards, to places of detention which are so over-crowded, rife with disease and where they suffer further violence and abuse. And in camps on the Greek islands our teams continue to provide care to migrants and asylum seekers as their health and mental health deteriorates from years of living in limbo. We see the desperation of these people; we treat the injuries they have received during their journeys or related to the conditions they are held in. And we continue to speak out.

Since August last year, we have witnessed a new crisis emerging on the Belarus / Lithuanian / Polish borders. And we will hear from a colleague from the MSF team that is providing assistance to migrants at border areas but where access to deliver medical care and humanitarian aid remains hampered. EU member states involved have failed to live up to their responsibilities to protect people's lives, to uphold basic rights of people seeking protection, and to permit humanitarian assistance to reach vulnerable people, regardless of whether they are in a small boat crossing the Mediterranean Sea or hiding in a snow-clad forest in Lithuania.

On behalf of MSF teams providing impartial, independent, medical assistance on the frontlines of humanitarian crises around the world - we thank you again for inviting us before the Committee today. We will start our highlighting of but a few key contexts by crossing to Sarah Leahy, returned Project Coordinator for MSF in Helmand Province.

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