Medics Win Nobel Prize
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MEDICINE

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Doctor's Without Borders honored for service

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Say the word "Kosovo" or "East Timor" and immediately images are conjured up of death and carnage. Yet in a world which is smoldering with such hatred, there is also a force for good--the unsung heroes of the international medical relief organization Doctors Without Borders/Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF). Armed with nothing but their passion to cure and their medical supplies, these brave men and women--physicians, nurses and relief workers--travel to no-man's land, hellish places abandoned even by the governments concerned, providing medical assistance in more than 80 countries, 20 of which are in conflict. It is therefore heartening to learn the Medecins San Frontieres have finally been given credit for their selfless work and awarded the prestigious Nobel Peace Prize for 1999 and recieved us $945,000.

There are many doctors of Indian origin serving in

MSF. The couple that I interviewed served in Kosovo and East Timor, two of the most nightmarish places on Earth, where death and destruction were a way of life. Dr. Latha Palaniappan and her husband Sukumar Ramanathan of California are an unusual couple. Married only a month, they went almost straight from their wedding reception to the hellhole of East Timor. What a honeymoon! Yet you won't find a more content couple. Latha Palaniappan runs the refugee clinic in Dili. Asked why they decided to become a part of MSF, Sukumar says, "Latha was the primary motivator, as she has always wanted to practice medicine to help people suffering in catastrophe situations. I was fully in support of her joining Doctors without Borders since, on a previous trip to Africa, they were one of only two groups that I saw actively running clinics and medical programs for tribal populations in Tanzania."

This is the first mission for the young couple although both are well-traveled. What's been the most harrowing experience for them? "For Latha," said Sukumar, "the most disturbing experience has been the constant rumble of tanks and

half-tracks in front of the house all night, and the troops with sandbags and guns in the stadium where her clinic is. For me, the hardest thing to face is the devastation that has been wreaked on every village by the retreating militia. Schools and hospitals have been burned to the ground, and charred vehicles line every road."

Dr. Glenn Peirera, 28, is a young doctor who has served with MSF in the Sudan and Kosovo. Glenn's grandparents are from Goa, but his family lived in Kenya before emigrating to Australia. His work in MSF changed his perspective on medicine, and on India. "In the West, we spend a lot of money in saving very few lives. That same amount can save millions of lives in other countries. Sudan is nothing like you can imagine. Having been to India so many times, one feels one has seen poverty in Bombay and Calcutta. But in Sudan we were thinking twice about even feeding someone or giving antibiotics simply because the resources were so limited."

Mathias Levarek grew up in MSF--his mother was a key administrator assigned the task of setting

up the camps under the most difficult and often dangerous conditions. That's where he spent his childhood. Today he lives in America, with a strong interest in Hinduism nurtured by time in India. His is a unique perspective on MSF, beginning with his recollection that India was "like a vacation." "To me," he told Hinduism Today, "things are just fine in India, people get along mostly. They have a spiritual base. These were the easiest camps, based on poverty and lack of education." Like Peirera, he believes, "The worst you see in India is nothing compared to Africa." And he offered compliments to those Indian doctors he met in MSF. "They brought an inner spirit into my life. They would be the spiritual leaders of the group of doctors at the camp, because they were spiritual without pushing their own religion."