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Doctors Without Borders film hits big screens nationwide

Documentary a raw look into providing medical care under extreme battlefield conditions

By Lauren Viera

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Doctors Without Borders is a household name. Yet since the group's start (in France, as Medecins Sans Frontieres) in the early '70s, we've never seen extensive film footage of what, exactly, the doctors go through on a daily basis in the war-torn countries in which they work.

Next week, a special one-night, national screening of a new documentary will change that.

On Dec. 14, "Living in Emergency: Stories of Doctors Without Borders" will screen in 17 regional theaters, among 444 theaters nationwide that will simultaneously show the film. The strategy for screening in sync? To create a dialogue. The simultaneous screenings will be followed by a live town hall-style telecast, hosted by ABC News' Elizabeth Vargas and featuring Dr. Tom Krueger (among the surgeons in the film) and journalist Sebastian Junger.

"It's really to fulfill the aim of having a conversation," Jason Cone, MSF's communications director, said of the telecast, "a national conversation around the issues that our teams and our doctors face in their missions."

The 90-minute documentary, among 15 that will advance in the voting process for the documentary feature category of the 2009 Academy Awards, focuses on four doctors in the impoverished African nations of Liberia and Republic of Congo. The footage is understandably quite graphic in parts, and the interviewees speak frankly about their experiences with the organization. Via hand-held cameras, we're privy to surgeries performed in less than ideal conditions on individuals who are almost too far gone to save. It's a fascinating glimpse into the work of this Nobel Peace Prize-winning group, which has posted doctors in more than 60 countries worldwide.

"Living in Emergency: Stories of Doctors Without Borders" screens at 6:30 p.m. Monday in 17 theaters in the Chicago area, followed by a live town hall-style telecast. Information: doctorswithoutborders.org