



# MSF SPEAKING OUT

An introduction to the MSF Speaking Out Case Studies series



<http://speakingout.msf.org>

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## FOREWORD

This booklet provides a snapshot of the Speaking Out Case Studies series from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). The case studies openly examine and analyse the organisation’s actions and decision-making process during humanitarian emergencies that have led it to speak out.

From denouncing the forced relocation in Ethiopia in 1985, to the inaction of the international community during the Rwandan genocide of 1994, and the Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech that demanded an end to indiscriminate bombings of civilians in Chechnya, and much more.

In these studies, key information sources – MSF volunteers’ written and oral recollections – are reconstructed by highlighting documents and videos from the period concerned and interviewing the main actors.

This booklet summarises the key dilemmas facing MSF at 10 critical moments.

To learn more about the dynamics of MSF’s humanitarian response to these dilemmas, the full case studies are available to download for free at [speakingout.msf.org](http://speakingout.msf.org)

Front cover: MSF calls on Russia to stop the bombing of civilians in Chechnya at the Nobel Peace Prize ceremony in 1999. © Sandra Aslaksen



## FAMINE AND FORCED RELOCATIONS IN ETHIOPIA 1984 – 1986

In 1984 and 1985, a famine decimated the Ethiopian population, triggering an unprecedented humanitarian mobilisation and huge media attention. But the Ethiopian regime at the time also used the international aid as a bait to attract the populations and forcibly resettle them in appalling conditions. MSF publicly denounced the government's actions, leading to the expulsion of MSF France and a mixed response from other aid organisations.

In this context:

- What should have been done when it appeared that aid was being used against the population for whom it was intended?
- Could MSF's denunciation have endangered international aid operations in Ethiopia?
- By taking such positions, could MSF put its own existence and, thus, its other activities at risk?



MSF president Rony Brauman denounces the Ethiopian government's forced relocation of famine sufferers in 1985, at a press conference on his return from Ethiopia. © MSF



An MSF doctor in Korem camp, Ethiopia, 1985.  
© Christian Boisseaux-Chical



## SALVADORAN REFUGEE CAMPS IN HONDURAS

### 1988

In the early 1980s, civil war in El Salvador prompted thousands of people to flee to neighbouring Honduras. In 1988, after eight years in the refugee camps in Honduras, MSF decided to withdraw. It refused to meet the excessive, and even dangerous, demands of the refugee committees which were extensions of the Salvadoran guerrilla that exerted a tight and violent control over the refugee camps.



A consultation in Honduras, 1988. © MSF

MSF refused to reveal the real reasons for its departure so as to avoid a crackdown by the Honduran army on the refugees, however the media ultimately exposed these reasons.

During internal debates that preceded its withdrawal, dilemmas and questions arose:

- In order to continue assisting the refugee population is it acceptable that this aid strengthens the guerrilla's totalitarian hold over the refugees?
- Having decided to withdraw in the name of certain principles, is it acceptable to publicly expose these principles, thereby potentially endangering the refugees by revealing the presence of the guerrilla forces in the camps?
- On the other hand, would remaining silent about the reasons for withdrawal not negate the sense and impact of such a decision?

## SOMALIA: CIVIL WAR, FAMINE ALERT AND A UN “MILITARY-HUMANITARIAN” INTERVENTION

### 1991 – 1993

The civil war in Somalia started in 1991, at a time when the country was also facing a famine affecting hundreds of thousands. As MSF was one of the few medical organisations in Somalia during this time, its testimonies drew international attention to the crisis.



Mogadishu, December 1991. © Francois von Sury

MSF also denounced the abuses and the excessive use of force by the UNOSOM, which was conducting a so-called ‘humanitarian-military’ intervention in Somalia.

The dilemmas posed by MSF's operations and public speaking out sparked animated debate within the organisation:

- Should MSF employ armed guards?
- As virtually the only source of information in the field, how far could MSF go in releasing information without favouring one party to the conflict or another?
- How could MSF draw attention to the famine in Somalia, when all cameras were focused on the Gulf War?
- What position should MSF take about an armed intervention aiming to protect humanitarian aid convoys, with widespread support of the population, but raising MSF's fears that it would worsen the insecurity?
- How should MSF react to the excesses and abuses of this intervention?

# GENOCIDE OF RWANDAN TUTSI

## 1994

From April to June 1994, between 500,000 and one million Rwandan Tutsi were systematically exterminated. The killings occurred in spite of the presence of UN troops in Rwanda. Members of the UN Security Council were slow to call the Tutsi extermination 'genocide', hence evading the obligation to intervene and stop the slaughter, as stipulated by international law.

MSF met with government officials and issued public statements to try to mobilise governments out of their inertia, eventually calling for an international armed intervention.

These statements and actions resulted from numerous debates, conflicts and contradictory interpretations of the Rwandan situation and of MSF's role addressing the following dilemmas:

- Was it acceptable for a humanitarian organisation to remain silent when confronted with genocide or, on the contrary, to call for armed intervention, an action that would lead to loss of human life?
- Could MSF call on UN member states to pursue other means of action, thereby risking giving legitimacy to ineffective responses, given the nature of genocide?
- Launched just as France proposed to intervene in Rwanda, was there a risk that MSF's appeal for armed intervention would be appropriated for political gain?

# RWANDAN REFUGEE CAMPS IN ZAIRE AND TANZANIA

## 1994 – 1995

Following the genocide of Rwandan Tutsis from April to June 1994, hundreds of thousands of Rwandans fled to refugee camps in Zaire and Tanzania. It soon became apparent to MSF field workers that the camps were under the tight control of 'refugee leaders' who had themselves been responsible for the genocide.

The camps were transformed into rear bases from which the reconquest of Rwanda was sought, via a massive diversion of aid, violence, propaganda, and threats against refugees wishing to repatriate.

- Was it acceptable for MSF to assist people who had committed genocide?
- Should MSF accept that its aid was instrumentalised by leaders who used violence against the refugees and proclaim their intention to continue the war in order to complete the genocide they had started?
- For all that, could MSF renounce assisting a population in distress and on what basis should its arguments be founded?

Displaced people walk towards the transit camp in Rwabusoro, Rwanda, July 1994. 100,000 people passed here in 10 days.  
© Roger Job



## THE VIOLENCE OF THE NEW RWANDAN REGIME

### 1994 – 1995

From the moment the new Rwandan regime took power in July 1994, MSF teams witnessed abuses and brutalities committed by the administration and armed forces.

MSF made a number of public denouncements, after considering several dilemmas:

- Was it acceptable for MSF, having denounced the génocidaires' control over the Rwandan refugees in Zaire and Tanzania, to encourage the return of these refugees to Rwanda, given the insecurity that potentially awaited them?
- Did MSF have a responsibility to alert them to what was occurring in Rwanda?
- Could MSF – after having issued a call for an international armed intervention to put an end to the genocide – now criticise the regime that had effectively done so, thereby risking accusations of favouring the génocidaires and supporting the revisionists?
- Should MSF keep silent in order to continue caring for detainees who might otherwise die in the appalling prison conditions?



UN peacekeepers in the Kibeho camps after the Rwandan Patriotic Army shelled the displaced, April 1994. © MSF

## THE HUNTING AND KILLING OF RWANDAN REFUGEES IN ZAIRE-CONGO

### 1996 – 1997

In late 1996, the Rwandan refugee camps in Eastern Zaire were attacked by the Alliance of Democratic Forces for the Liberation of Congo, a group of Zairean rebel forces supported by the Rwandan army. For months, hundred of thousands of refugees fleeing through the Zairean rain forest, were tracked, starved and massacred by the soldiers of the Alliance who even used humanitarian workers as lures to attract them.

MSF released several public statements, some of which were slow in coming, following internal debates over key dilemmas:

- Could MSF extrapolate from the little known conditions of these refugees and their health needs to speak out about their presumed current plight, despite the fact that it had no access to them?
- Conversely, given lack of access, should MSF refrain from making predictions?
- Is it wise for a humanitarian organisation to predict the worst?
- Given that MSF was being used to lure refugees from hiding, should the organisation cease activities in the area or pursue them, condemning the manipulation of aid in the hope of preventing massacres – but at the risk of endangering its teams and other operations in the region?
- Should MSF call for the refugees to remain in eastern Zaire, with its deadly dangers, or participate in their forced repatriation to Rwanda, where their security was not guaranteed either?



## MSF AND NORTH KOREA

1995 – 1998

MSF spoke out publicly on several occasions while its teams were trying to bring assistance to the North Korean population on its territory between 1995 and 1998 and to the North Korean refugees in Asia in the following years.

MSF was confronted with the following dilemmas and questions during this time:

- Until which limit could MSF, in order to draw closer to a population in distress, accept to work without being able to apply the basic principles of humanitarian action: access to populations, free evaluation of needs and supervision of the destination of our assistance?
- Should MSF accept to work for a population oppressed by a totalitarian regime with the risk of its assistance serving to reinforce this oppression, support this regime?
- While making public calls for emergency aid for the North Korean health system, was MSF participating in reinforcing this regime?



A health centre  
in Pyongyang,  
North Korea,  
1997. © Peter van  
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## VIOLENCE AGAINST KOSOVAR ALBANIANS, NATO'S INTERVENTION

1998 – 1999

From 1998 to 1999, MSF teams witnessed a process of terror and expulsion which they described as the 'deportation' of Kosovar Albanians by Serb forces. This case study also described MSF's reaction to NATO aerial bombings and the control exercised over the refugee camps by this party to the conflict.

MSF faced various constraints and dilemmas during this time:

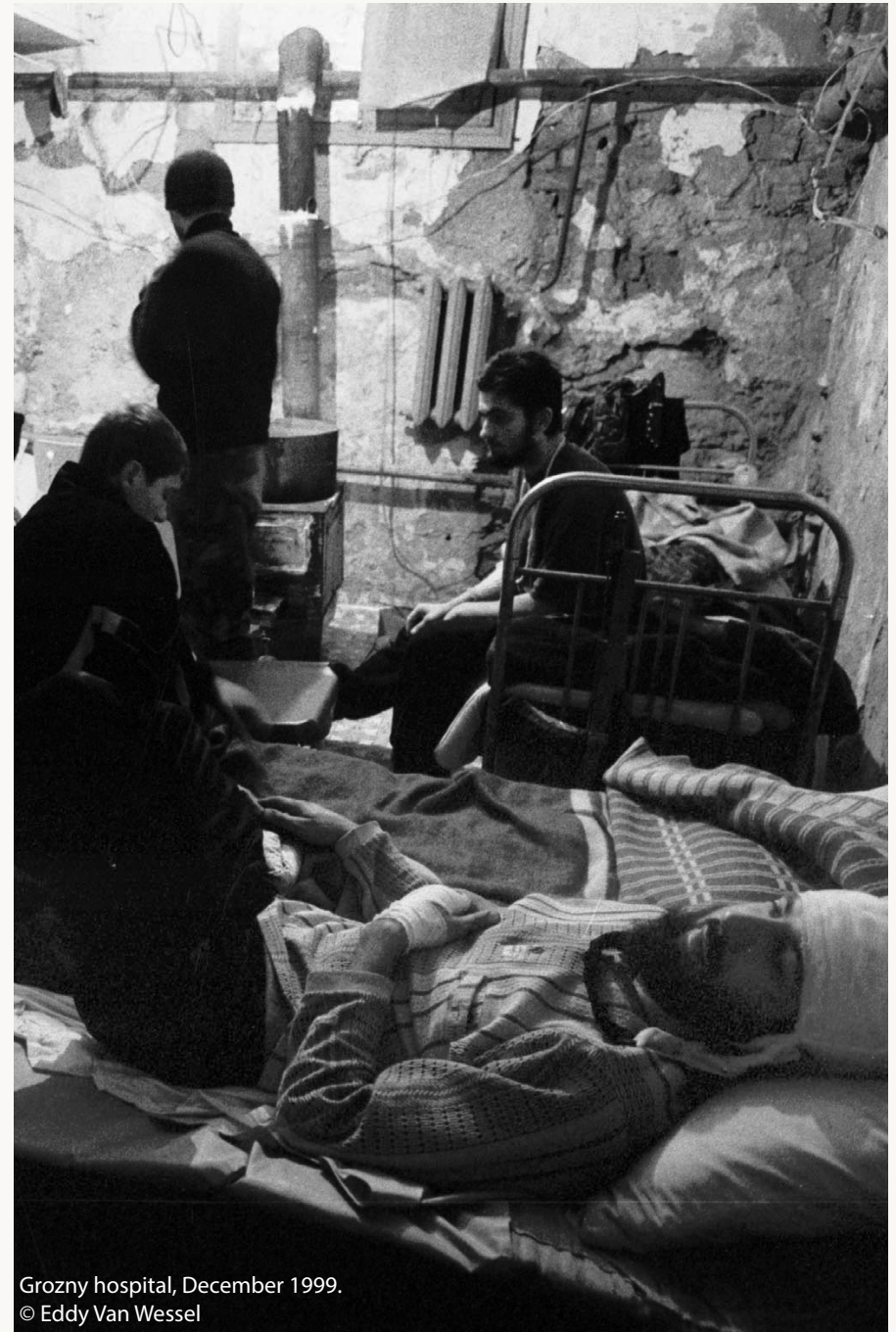
- Should MSF denounce the violence being committed against Kosovars at the risk of being excluded from access to these people and of encouraging the NATO intervention?
- Should MSF take a stance on the NATO intervention?
- What sort of relationship should be established with countries that were committed either militarily (such as NATO members) or politically (Greece) in the conflict and their civil societies?
- Should MSF raise the alarm about the absence of the UNHCR in the management of the refugee camps, at the risk of reinforcing this marginalisation?
- Is it justifiable to carry out an assessment mission that sacrifices the principle of operational independence, by invoking an interpretation of the principle of impartiality that implies a responsibility to assist victims on both sides of a conflict?

# WAR CRIMES AND POLITICS OF TERROR IN CHECHNYA

1994 – 2004

This case study describes the constraints, questions and dilemmas experienced by MSF while speaking out during the two Russian-Chechen wars and the following years of 'normalisation':

- Was speaking out the right thing to do with regard to Russia, a power with a veto at the UN Security Council and a tradition of propaganda control of the public arena?
- Was it realistic to rely on raising the awareness of other UN member states via their public's opinion?
- In a context of terror, when dealing with a regime in denial of the reality of a conflict, was it useful and was it up to MSF to call for having this situation qualified as 'war'?
- Should MSF take into account the possibility of a causal link between instances of its public speaking out and the security incidents involving its staff?
- When one of its staff members was taken hostage, should MSF speak out in the media to create visibility that affords him/her some protection, or conversely remain as discrete as possible so as to avoid a rise in his/her 'market value'?
- Should MSF publically point out responsibilities, negligence, or even complicity of the government on which soil the kidnapping had occurred, thereby taking active steps to secure the hostage's release, or should it refrain from such a discourse because of the risk of the opposite effect?
- Should MSF continue to publically denounce the violence inflicted on people in the region, at the risk of radicalising those parties to the conflict responsible for the kidnapping, and place the hostage's life in danger?



Grozny hospital, December 1999.  
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