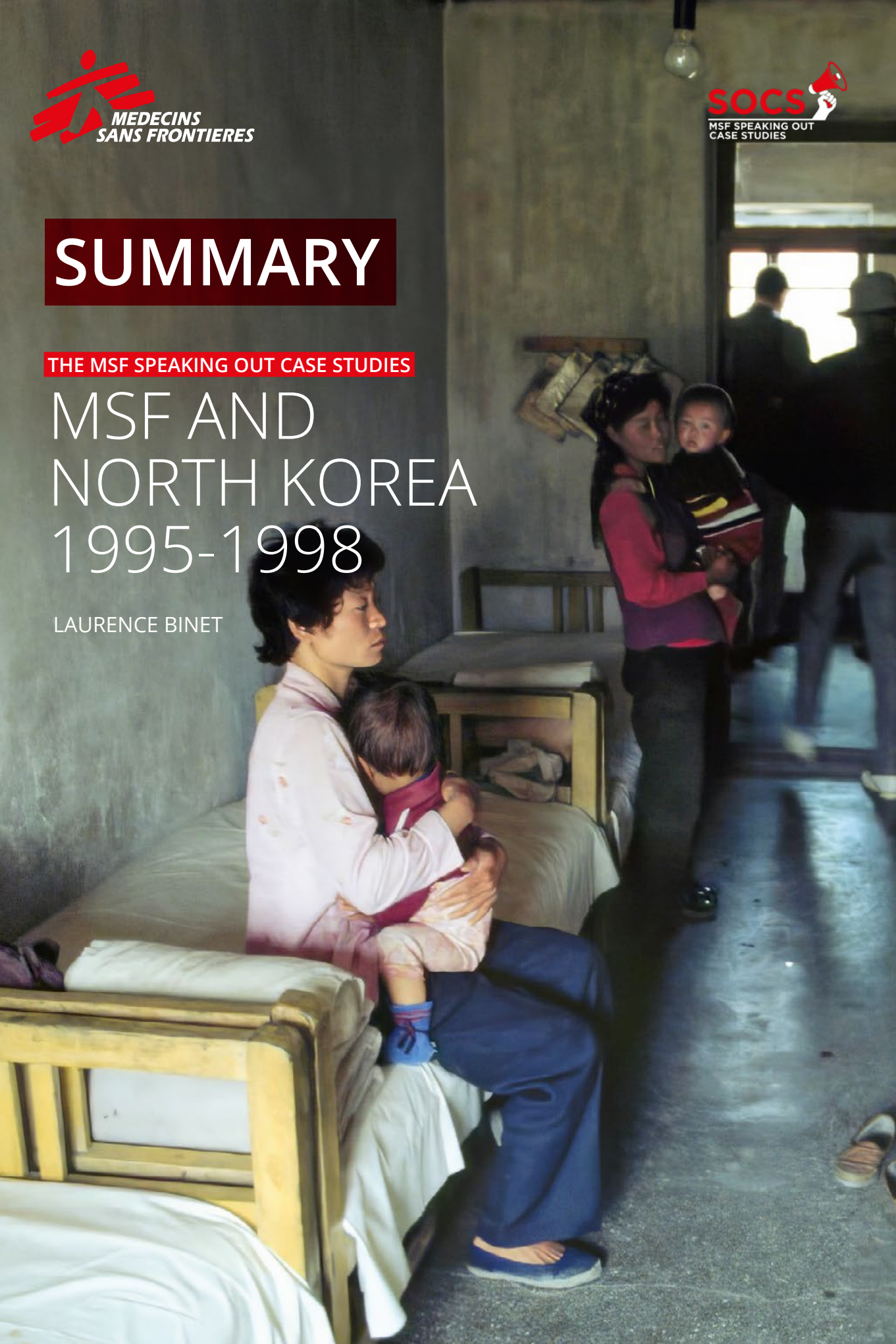


SUMMARY

THE MSF SPEAKING OUT CASE STUDIES

MSF AND NORTH KOREA 1995-1998

LAURENCE BINET



.....

The summary lays out the context and the content of MSF's public statements and the key dilemmas they sought to address.

It is part of a more detailed case study that reconstructs the events using excerpts from documents taken from the MSF archives or from media coverage at the time, as well as interviews with MSF personnel.

You can download the full case study on our website:

www.msf.org/speakingout/all-case-studies

The MSF Speaking Out Case Studies is a project of MSF International. All our materials are available open access in English and French

SUMMARY

In August 1995, for the first time in its history, North Korea launched a call for international aid following the destruction of its harvests by flooding. Following the breakdown of the Soviet Union, its main source of support, the planned economy of this closed-off country gradually collapsed. The population, completely dependent on the regime's arbitrary resource management, experienced shortages of energy, food, and medicines.

The countries involved in the Korean crisis (regional powers and the United States of America, USA) were anxious to avoid a collapse of North Korea, which would impact on the entire region. They were encouraging peace negotiations between the two Koreas and a freezing and dismantling process of North Korea's nuclear arms. The United Nations responded to this appeal with the delivery of millions of tonnes of aid, thereby entering years of an ongoing bargaining process linking the progress of negotiations to the allocation of aid.

From October to December 1995, an international Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) team, composed of staff from the Belgian, French, and Dutch sections, set up a programme in North Korea providing epidemiological monitoring of diarrhoea and distributing medicines and medical material.

In January 1997, MSF again received authorisation to open a barley seed distribution programme, and then, from June 1997 on, over several provinces, a one-year programme providing support to improve nutritional therapeutic care to malnourished children, including training and the distribution of medical material, medicines, and drinking water to health centres.

For one and a half years, 13 MSF international staff from three different sections followed the example of their colleagues who had passed through the country in 1995, working under tight surveillance while being unable to evaluate needs based on objective criteria or check the destination of their aid. Nonetheless, some of them were encouraged by certain signs and events. There was the organisation of case management for a group of children totally excluded by the system, for example.

Meanwhile, the MSF France team in China, having received information on the outcome of North Korean refugees in China, carried out two visits (in April and August 1998) to the Sino- Korean border. The refugees provided them with descriptions of a large-scale famine, violence, and arbitrary rule in the country. They also reported that international aid was distributed as a priority to the army and to individuals identified as "socially useful" and faithful to the regime. This situation was also reported by South Korean organisations providing assistance to refugees and by the international press, which started conveying echoes of famine in North Korea.

In August 1998, after several months of negotiation between MSF and the North Korean authorities on the renewal of their Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), Pyongyang made only one proposition: the organisation of an importation programme

for basic materials that would allow the regime to rehabilitate the country's pharmaceuticals industry. MSF refused, considering that this type of activity did not fall within the mandate of a medical humanitarian organisation, and withdrew from North Korea.

Throughout this period, the occasions when MSF spoke out in public, whilst conducted in the name of the entire movement, caused disagreement between sections and/or between headquarters and the field teams. As it turns out, there are contradictions within these arguments.

In December 1997, during a press conference, MSF publicly insisted on the necessity of providing emergency assistance to the North Korean health system.

In April 1998, in the international press, MSF described the restrictions imposed on its teams during their activities carried out for the North Korean population and expressed their doubts on the final destination of their aid, but stated that it did not have any solid proof for denying or confirming the existence of a famine. At the same time, the international press circulated witness accounts of North Korean refugees, received from the MSF team in China, reporting a famine situation.

On 1 October 1998, during a press conference, MSF gave a public explanation of the reasons for its withdrawal from North Korea, shared its concern on the outcome of socially disadvantaged children excluded by the system, and referred to the witness accounts of the North Korean refugees. It also called on the international community to stop delivering aid to North Korea whilst it was unable to check that the aid was really reaching the most vulnerable members of the population.

Throughout this whole period, MSF was confronted with the following dilemmas and questions:

- ▶ Up to what point could MSF, 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 its 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 and support this regime?
- ▶ Whilst making public calls for emergency aid for the North Korean health system, was MSF not participating in reinforcing the regime?

EPILOGUE:

In the years that followed, the French section, with the support of its internal research centre, continued to document the deviations of international aid delivered to North Korea and spoke out on this subject in the press on several different occasions. At the same time, it ran a programme of little operational stature (because it was partly clandestine) in an attempt to bring assistance to North Korean refugees in China or in transit through different countries in Asia and South Korea.

From 2001 to 2003, MSF France spoke out publicly several times to denounce the repression and forced repatriation suffered by these refugees in China, despite the presence of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). As time passed, all MSF's activities concerning North Korean refugees dwindled to a standstill.

Meanwhile, in 2004, a visit by a delegation of MSF Holland to North Korea with the aim of preparing an exploratory mission led to nothing.

In 2007, new alarms sounded on the food situation in North Korea, and a continuous influx of refugees arrived on the Sino-Korean border, inciting the Swiss section to launch an exploratory mission, then a process of re-opening a programme for North Korean refugees.

To quote this content:

Laurence Binet, "MSF and North Korea 1995-1998", February 2008, URL:

<https://www.msf.org/speakingout/msf-and-north-korea-1995-1998>

.....

Thank you for reading.

If you would like to explore these events further, we invite you to consult the SOCS project website where you will find:

- the complete case study
- maps showing where MSF worked
- a detailed chronology
- MSF videos and extracts from the period

Some case studies have also been adapted into podcasts and online courses

Find all the MSF Speaking Out Case Studies materials here:

www.msf.org/speakingout/all-case-studies