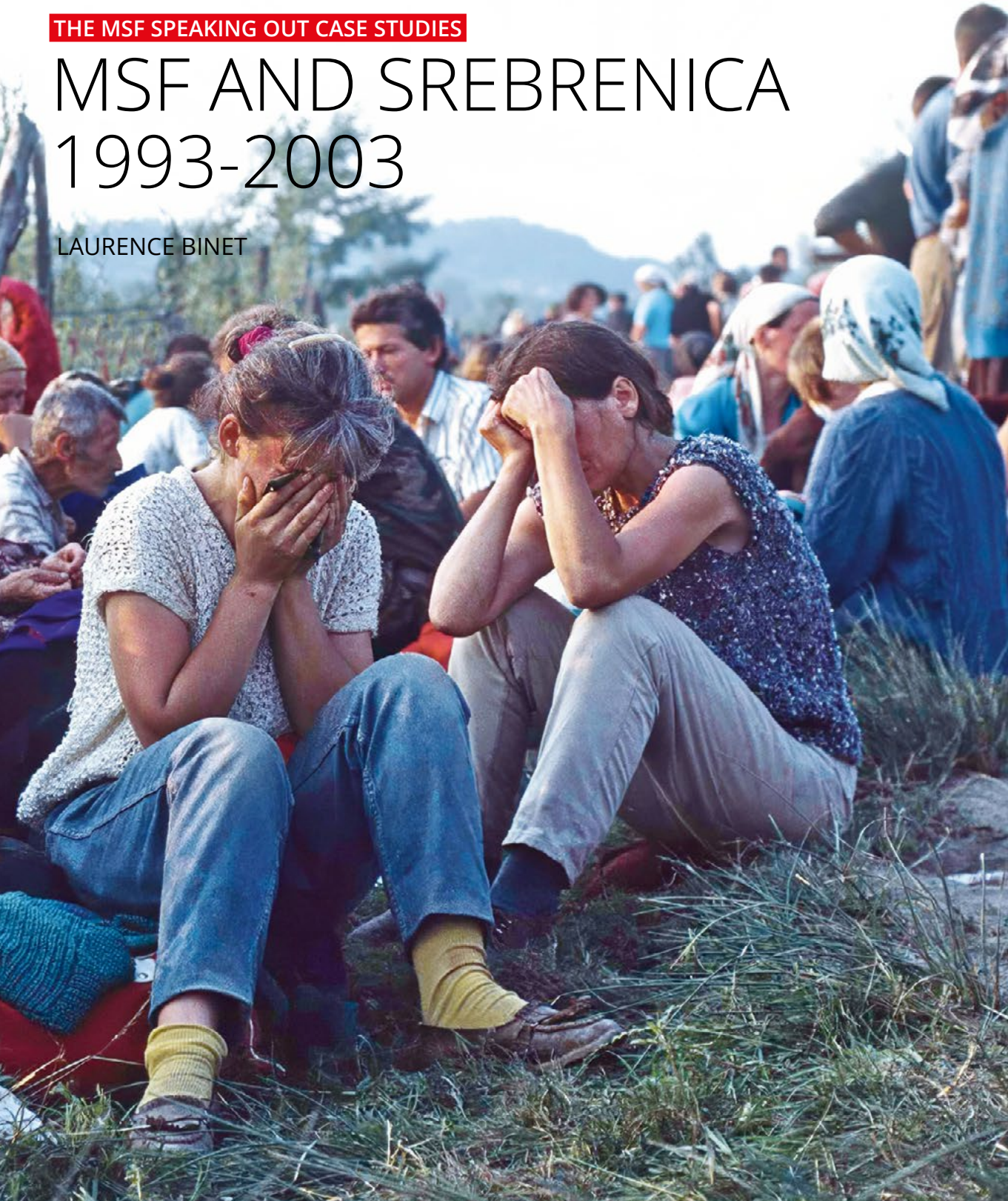


SUMMARY

THE MSF SPEAKING OUT CASE STUDIES

MSF AND SREBRENICA 1993-2003

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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 1992, after the former Yugoslavia disintegrated, the Bosnian Serb forces took control of most of eastern Bosnia-Herzegovina and tried to forcibly bring all non-Serbs under its rule. The city of Srebrenica became a besieged and overcrowded enclave, serving as a refuge for the region's Muslim population. The Muslim population only received erratic supplies and was dependent on the goodwill of the Serbian troops that regularly bombed the city.

In March 1993, General Morillon, Commander of the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR) in Bosnia-Herzegovina, finally managed to enter the enclave with a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) convoy after months of blockade. He promised the population that they would not be abandoned. Srebrenica, as well as Zepa, Sarajevo, Tuzla, Gorazde, and Bihac, became demilitarised 'safe areas' under the protection of UNPROFOR.

A Médecins Sans Frontières team also entered Srebrenica in General Morillon's wake and informed the media about conditions there. During the following weeks, MSF opened a medical and health programme in the enclave. For two years, its teams worked in what some considered an open-air prison. MSF provided relief that kept alive a population suffering a suffocating siege. On a number of occasions, MSF informed the media about the difficulties it was having in obtaining permission to deliver supplies, medicine, and even international staff.

On 6 July 1995, Bosnian Serb forces attacked Srebrenica. In the days that followed, the two MSF international staff, who were helping the wounded, witnessed the military offensive by Bosnian Serb forces. The Serbs took control of the enclave, forcibly evacuated the population, while separating and detaining men over the age of sixteen. Srebrenica was taken on 11 July 1995; UNPROFOR and NATO soldiers did not provide any military resistance to the capture of the 'safe area' or make any effort to protect the population. The UNPROFOR Dutch peacekeeping contingent, of which some members were being held hostage, did not offer any resistance. NATO's air strikes were too little and too late. They had no impact on the situation on the ground.

Twenty-two MSF staff members and Srebrenica hospital employees were reported dead or missing.

Throughout this period, MSF provided detailed accounts to the media about everything its team was witnessing in the enclave and issued frequent appeals urging protection for the population.

Another MSF team provided relief to tens of thousands of refugees who had fled Srebrenica for Tuzla. They recorded their eyewitness accounts.

During the weeks following the enclave's fall, it was discovered that Serbian forces had massacred more than 8,000 male adults and adolescents over the age of 16. Charges

and arrest warrants were issued against Bosnian Serb leaders Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic.

The media revealed that General Mladic and General Janvier, the UNPROFOR commander, had apparently entered into an agreement that conditioned the release of the captive peacekeepers on the suspension of air strikes.

MSF published its Srebrenica team's logbook as well as the eyewitness accounts recorded in Tuzla. The team responded to media queries about its relations with the Dutch peacekeepers, whose passive behaviour was under question.

After the Dayton Peace Accords¹ on the former Yugoslavia were signed in December 1995, MSF publicly urged the parties not to let the desire for peace impede justice or the establishment of responsibility for the events that occurred in Srebrenica.

On 15 November 1999, the UN report on the Srebrenica events acknowledged the organisation's "errors of judgement" and asked the member states involved in the conflict to investigate their own responsibility.

In July 2000, based on this report and encouraged by the creation of an investigative parliamentary commission on Rwanda in 1998, MSF's French section called for the establishment of a French parliamentary commission to look into France's responsibility for the events leading up to the Srebrenica massacre. Its goal would be to understand how political, military, and humanitarian strategies and failures led to the abandonment and massacre of part of the 'safe area' population even though the zone was supposed to be protected – then learn the necessary lessons based on the results. It was essential to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of international military operations that were designed to protect civilian populations and that have been growing in number in recent years.

In November 2000, a parliamentary Fact-Finding Commission was finally set up, and MSF contributed critical active support by providing the legislators with key facts. This information could help them ask questions likely to elicit answers that could shed light on the events. All of this information, as well as MSF's comments, were sent to the media and posted on a dedicated website.

When the Commission's report was published in November 2001, MSF publicly stressed that while the report did acknowledge the responsibility of the armed forces, it gave a free pass to political leaders.

In 2002 and 2003, the Dutch section of MSF issued a public statement about the various reports published at the request of the Dutch authorities. These reports spread responsibility for the tragedy among all players in the international community. MSF's message focused on the need to draw the necessary conclusions from the Srebrenica crisis in terms of protecting civilians from the violence of war.

MSF publicly urged the United States and the United Kingdom to launch investigations into their own responsibilities for the Srebrenica events.

Throughout this period, MSF faced a host of questions and dilemmas:

- ▶ By agreeing to provide a minimally acceptable level of relief to a besieged population, wasn't MSF contributing, like prison doctors, to the strategy of the besieging troops while concurrently softening their image?
- ▶ On the other hand, wouldn't calling for the evacuation of civilians who wished to leave have been equivalent to abetting the ethnic cleansing policy of the besieging army?
- ▶ Having trusted the UN Protection Force's commitment to protect the enclave and its population, must MSF accept partial culpability for or complicity in the UN's abandonment of the enclave and the ensuing massacre of the population? Didn't MSF give the population the false impression that it would be safe as long as the team was present?
- ▶ Is it the role of a humanitarian medical organisation to issue an appeal for an investigative parliamentary commission then, once it is established, to actively monitor it with a critical eye?
- ▶ Conversely, how can MSF not try to understand the circumstances and responsibilities, which, at the global level, led to the abandonment and massacre of a population to which its teams had provided relief? Can MSF be content with calling for a parliamentary investigation without ensuring that it asks the types of question likely to elicit answers that shed light on the events?
- ▶ By failing to also explore the shadowy areas of the agreements signed between the Bosnian Serbs and Bosnians, doesn't MSF risk acting as a prosecutor of only UN and member state practices and not of other actors?
- ▶ Should Srebrenica be viewed as an accident of history or as a clear-cut example of the impossibility of protecting populations under international mandates established by the UN?

To quote this content:

Laurence Binet, 'MSF and Srebrenica 1993-2003', December 2015, URL:
<https://www.msf.org/speakingout/msf-and-srebrenica-1993-2003>

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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