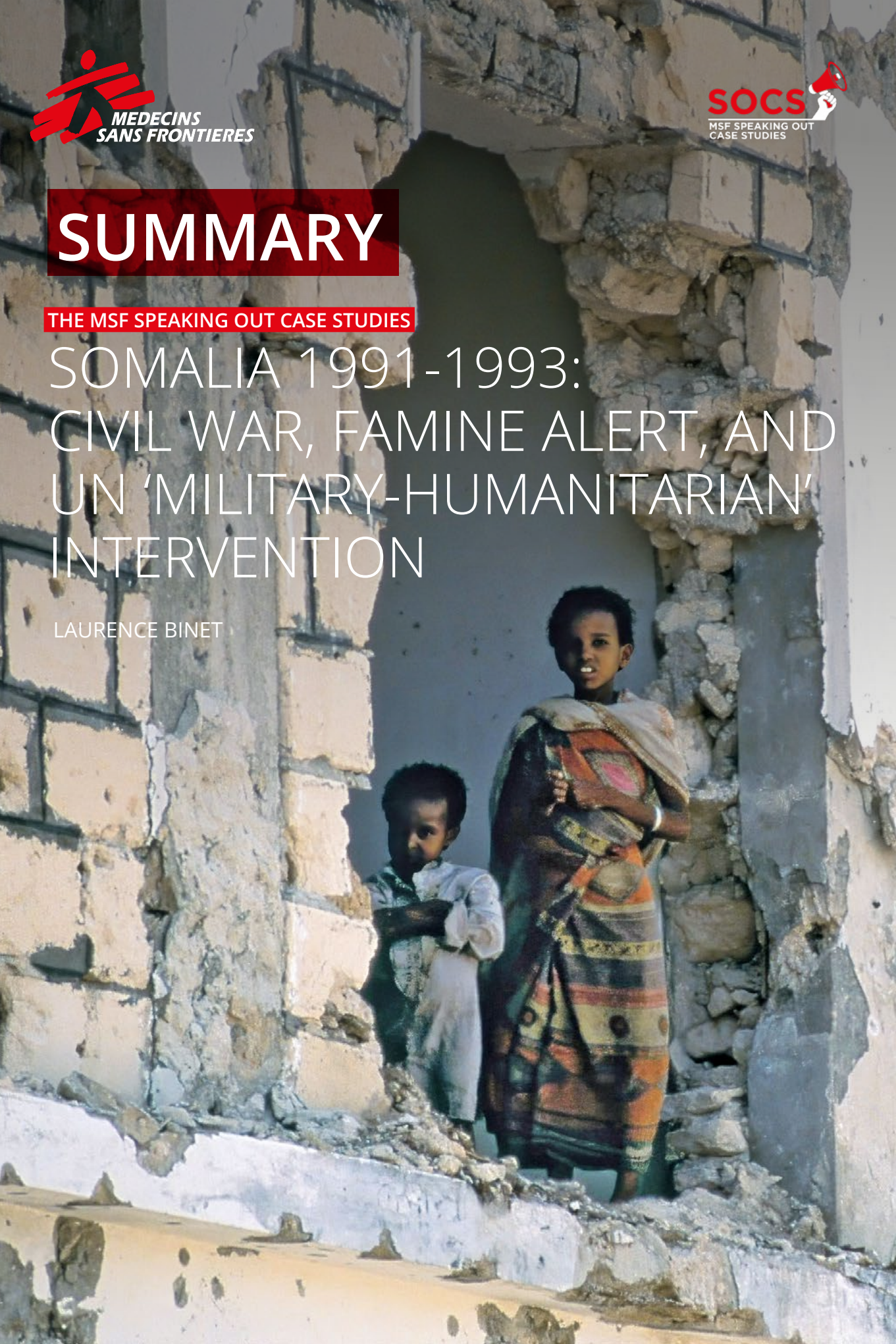


SUMMARY

THE MSF SPEAKING OUT CASE STUDIES

SOMALIA 1991-1993: CIVIL WAR, FAMINE ALERT, AND UN 'MILITARY-HUMANITARIAN' INTERVENTION

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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 December 1990, a state of emergency held sway in Somalia, an East African country devastated by a civil war pitting the forces of President Siad Barre, in power for over 20 years, against several movements of armed opposition, which had slowly but surely gained control of the country. In January 1991, Siad Barre was overthrown and took flight. In August, the civil war flared up again between the supporters of Ali Mahdi Muhammad, the Interim President, and General Mohamed Farrah Aidid, Head of the Armed Forces¹. The country was further decimated by a drought affecting the entire Horn of Africa. A famine followed, leaving hundreds of thousands of victims in its wake before the deployment of international aid began in August 1992.

The insecurity gave rise to an intervention by the United Nations (UN)'s armed forces (United Nations Operation in Somalia, UNOSOM I), aiming to protect aid convoys and humanitarian workers from looters. The first troops, deployed in September and October 1992, were rapidly replaced by an international force under United States command (Unified Task Force, UNITAF), which landed in Somalia in December 1992, in turn replaced by UN troops (UNOSOM II) in March 1993. The intervention was tarnished by a series of incidents and excessive demonstrations of violence committed by the international 'peacekeeping' troops stationed around Somalia.

In June 1993, following an attack against the Pakistani contingent of the UN peacekeepers, a manhunt was launched against General Aidid. During the months that followed, the fighting escalated: buildings harbouring Aidid's close circle or humanitarian workers were bombed, civilians were killed by the UN forces, and UN soldiers were humiliated, mistreated, or killed.

During the night of 17 and 18 June 1993, the base of the organisation Action Against Hunger International (Action International Contre la Faim, AICF) was bombed. It harboured a Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) team and several journalists at the time. One employee was killed; several others were wounded.

In October 1993, the UN forces, under American command, launched an attack against General Aidid's forces in Mogadishu. It turned into a fiasco, causing many deaths among civilians and UN soldiers. After successive renewals of its mandate, but with no control ever established over a steadily deteriorating situation, the UNOSOM II troops began their definitive withdrawal from Somalia in March 1995.

WHAT DID MSF SEE AND DO?

In December 1990, all United Nations and humanitarian organisation personnel evacuated Somalia and Mogadishu, a capital ravaged by the fighting.

1. Commonly accepted English spelling of Somali names, or Somali spelling, is used in this report where possible. However, these spellings have not always been consistent and variations in the historical documents have been retained in the source extracts.

In January 1991, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) relayed a rebels' call for medical assistance. MSF responded with the dispatch of a team to Mogadishu, composed of different sections' international staff. In the weeks that followed, MSF was the only medical organisation providing assistance to the Somali people, notably through its surgical programmes in Mogadishu's shattered hospitals. As 1991 unfolded, MSF added a programme for reconstructive surgery for the war-wounded to its offer of healthcare.

Given the rising insecurity, the organisation started employing and paying armed guards. These guards were recruited by a businessman close to General Aidid and his clan.

In such a context of warfare, drought, and population displacements, a famine became highly likely, but the general insecurity rendered any evaluation outside Mogadishu impossible. It was only in March 1992 that a team of epidemiologists from Epicentre, an MSF unit dedicated to research and epidemiology, was able to conduct a public health survey in the Merca region. The results showed a nutritional disaster. From June 1992 on, MSF's operational sections rolled out therapeutic nutritional programmes in the worst affected regions of Somalia, focusing on the most severe patients, and leaving mass food distribution to the ICRC and the Somali Red Crescent Society.

In March 1993, the French section of MSF decided to withdraw from Somalia, considering the emergency to be over. Staying would require near-impossible safeguarding against UN excesses at the possible expense of its teams' lives. MSF France closed its programmes in late May, but the section sent a team back on two occasions, in June and October 1993, when the fighting re-erupted with intensity in Mogadishu. In late April 1993, the Dutch section wound down its activities in Baidoa, following a series of security incidents, including an attack on its team carried out by its armed guards. The Belgian section continued its programmes in Kismayo.

WHAT DID MSF SAY?

In early 1991, when all cameras were focused on the Gulf War, which opposed a coalition of western nations against Saddam Hussein's Iraq, MSF went to great lengths to draw attention to the civil war tearing Somalia apart, and its humanitarian consequences. During the initial months of intervention, detailed press releases were issued on a daily basis, while MSF, the only foreign organisation present in Somalia, was one of the rare, and often only, sources of media information on unfolding events.

An epidemiological survey conducted in the region of Merca by Epicentre at MSF's request in March 1992, and released during a press conference in May, aimed to secure mortality figures to demonstrate the severity of the famine, which MSF was sure existed and to which it was planning its response accordingly. In the weeks and months that followed, efforts were boosted in communication, lobbying, and public relations so as to focus sustained attention on the Somali people's fate. MSF called on donor countries and the United Nations for massive deliveries of food aid. When international aid did finally reach Somalia, MSF's bases became reception centres for the world's press.

In September 1992, on the announcement of the Blue Berets being dispatched to protect humanitarian convoys, the presidents of MSF France and MSF Holland publicly stated their doubts about the intervention's relevance and possible effectiveness in securing humanitarian operations in Somalia. Conversely, they feared an increase in insecurity and tensions, which they suggested could be limited by a massive scale-up in aid. Meanwhile, MSF Belgium prepared a press release in support of the intervention, which was never released.

MSF then saw the results of its mortality survey – conducted on the displaced population in Merca alone – extrapolated to the entire Somali population and circulated by senior UN staff, with media uptake. Combined with exaggerated statements on the scale of aid diversion, these distortions of the reality contributed to justifications for the 'military-humanitarian' intervention.

In October 1992, MSF lent public support to Mohamed Sahnoun, the United Nations' Special Representative in Somalia, who preferred diplomatic efforts to military action and who was forced to resign after criticising the ineffectiveness of the UN's humanitarian operations in Somalia. In late November, the leaders of the French section of MSF decided against a public stance on the deployment of a multinational force under the United States' command. However, various interventions in the press by the section's president indicated some opposition to a 'military-humanitarian' intervention, as it was referred to, by those calling it into question. Meanwhile, MSF Belgium declared itself in favour of the intervention, while considering the risks that the operation entailed for humanitarian workers.

In December 1992, the MSF teams in Baidoa and Kismayo denounced the delayed arrival of the multinational troops to the press; these towns were under heavy fire from looters fleeing the capital before the troops' arrival. MSF felt that a timely UN presence could have avoided the chaos. MSF Belgium called for information from the Belgian authorities and their representatives in the United States and Kenya on the UN troops' operational intentions.

In May 1993, MSF Belgium delivered a report to the authorities denouncing excesses and abuses committed by the Belgian paratroopers stationed in Kismayo, as witnessed by MSF teams. In August 1993, the organisation confirmed these facts to the Belgian media, which made the affair public. In June 1993, MSF publicly denounced the excessive use of force by UNOSOM troops and the civilian murders in Mogadishu. In July, MSF denounced the UN forces' bombing of Action Against Hunger International's base, harbouring MSF personnel at the time. Also in August, MSF introduced a complaint "on the violation of humanitarian law in Somalia within the framework of UNOSOM operations" to the United Nations Security Council, the Military High Command and the commanders of the national UN contingents in Somalia. The complaint was held non-admissible by the various UN bodies, but, in the longer term, it led to internal UN reflection and a reform of the peacekeepers' rules of engagement.

In September 1993, the French section's president published a text entitled 'Somalia, the Humanitarian Crime', criticising the excesses and abuses of the international intervention. In the months that followed, MSF justified its withdrawal by raising questions on the UNOSOM troops' practices.

DILEMMAS AND QUESTIONS

Throughout this entire crisis, the dilemmas posed by MSF's operations and public speaking out sparked animated debate within the organisation:

- ▶ As the only source of information in the field, how far could MSF go in releasing information to the media without compromising its neutrality by favouring one party to the conflict or another?
- ▶ In a context with such major security issues rendering all assistance highly risky, should MSF employ armed guards at the risk of adding to the climate of violence? Should we content ourselves with employing armed guards associated with one party to the conflict alone, at the risk of damaging the organisation's image of neutrality and thus potentially placing our teams in danger?
- ▶ Having called for the international community to take action, what could MSF do and say when this action came about in the form of a military intervention aiming to protect humanitarian aid convoys, raising fears within MSF that, on the contrary, it would only worsen the insecurity? Should we question this intervention when it had the widespread support of the population being assisted?
- ▶ Likewise, how should MSF react when the results of its mortality survey – limited to the displaced in the Merca region alone – were extrapolated to the entire Somali population by senior UN officials, with media uptake?
- ▶ Should MSF keep programmes running when the emergency is over so as to react swiftly if the situation deteriorates again, at the risk of endangering its teams and condoning the excesses and abuses of an international 'military-humanitarian' intervention?

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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