

SUMMARY

THE MSF SPEAKING OUT CASE STUDIES

VIOLENCE AGAINST KOSOVAR ALBANIANS, NATO'S INTERVENTION 1998-1999

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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:

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SUMMARY

In the early 1980s, the ethnic Albanian population who formed the majority in the Serb province of Kosovo revolted against the discriminatory system imposed on them by Serbia. That system was further strengthened after 1989 by the new President of the Yugoslav Federation, Slobodan Milosevic.

MSF teams, which had been working in Kosovo since 1993 in the context of MSF intervention in Bosnia, supported the parallel health network established by the Albanian independence movement. From March 1998, attacks on Albanian villages by the Federal Yugoslav army and the Serb police increased and were exacerbated by the guerrilla action of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA/UÇK). Several thousand people were killed and tens of thousands more fled into the interior and over the border.

Conscious of the deteriorating situation, MSF decided to inform European public opinion and to increase awareness by publishing communiqués and refugee eyewitness accounts, which were reported in the press. The United States and Europe – who were behind the Bosnia peace accords – simultaneously increased pressure on Belgrade, calling on the Milosevic government to put an end to violence against Albanian Kosovars or risk an armed intervention by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), an intergovernmental military alliance of European and North American states.

On 24 March 1999, after several months of fruitless negotiations during which violence and population movements increased, NATO began an aerial bombardment of Serbia and Kosovo. The Serb forces responded with increasing terror, forcing hundreds of thousands of Albanian Kosovars to flee to neighbouring Albania, Macedonia, and Montenegro. MSF then organised a number of relief operations for these refugees at the borders of Kosovo. At the same time, NATO mobilised military assets as a means of organising and controlling aid.

In April and May 1999, MSF on several occasions publicly denounced both the control being exercised over the refugee camps by NATO – which was a party to the conflict – and the marginalisation of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). In particular, MSF stressed the need to provide refugee protection and reported what was happening to the Albanian Kosovars who were still in the province, under the control of Serb forces.

On 30 April 1999, MSF published a report entitled, 'Kosovo: Accounts of a Deportation'. Compiled on the basis of refugee accounts and an epidemiological study, this report showed that the Kosovar Albanians were the victims of a systematic process of terror and expulsion, described by MSF as "deportation". It again alerted public opinion to the lack of refugee protection in the camps run by NATO.

At the beginning of May 1999, MSF's Greek section undertook an exploratory mission to Kosovo and Serbia, despite opposition from the other sections who considered that this mission was not in accordance with MSF's principles of operational independence. The Greek section was excluded from the movement until 2005 as a result of this action.

Throughout the period of military operations, MSF managers actively refuted the notion of 'humanitarian war' promoted by NATO.

These different stances were taken in the context of an armed conflict in which western countries were participating directly and which they justified by invoking human rights and humanitarian requirements.

This political environment considerably reinforced the dilemmas and difficulties for MSF:

- ▶ Should it speak out to denounce violence being committed against the Kosovars, at the risk of being itself excluded by the Serb authorities from access to these people?
- ▶ By denouncing and describing the violence against Kosovars, was MSF encouraging/supporting the NATO intervention?
- ▶ Should MSF take a position on the NATO intervention, or not?
- ▶ What sort of relationships (finance, cooperation, etc) should be established with countries that were committed either militarily (such as NATO members) or politically (Greece) in the conflict?
- ▶ By raising the alert about UNHCR's absence/withdrawal/lack of effectiveness in managing the refugee camps, was MSF taking the risk of reinforcing UNHCR's marginalisation?
- ▶ Is it justifiable, by invoking an interpretation of the impartiality principle that implies a responsibility to assist victims on both sides of a conflict, to carry out an exploratory mission that sacrifices the principles of operational independence?
- ▶ Does MSF hold double standards for developing countries armed forces and western armed forces?

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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