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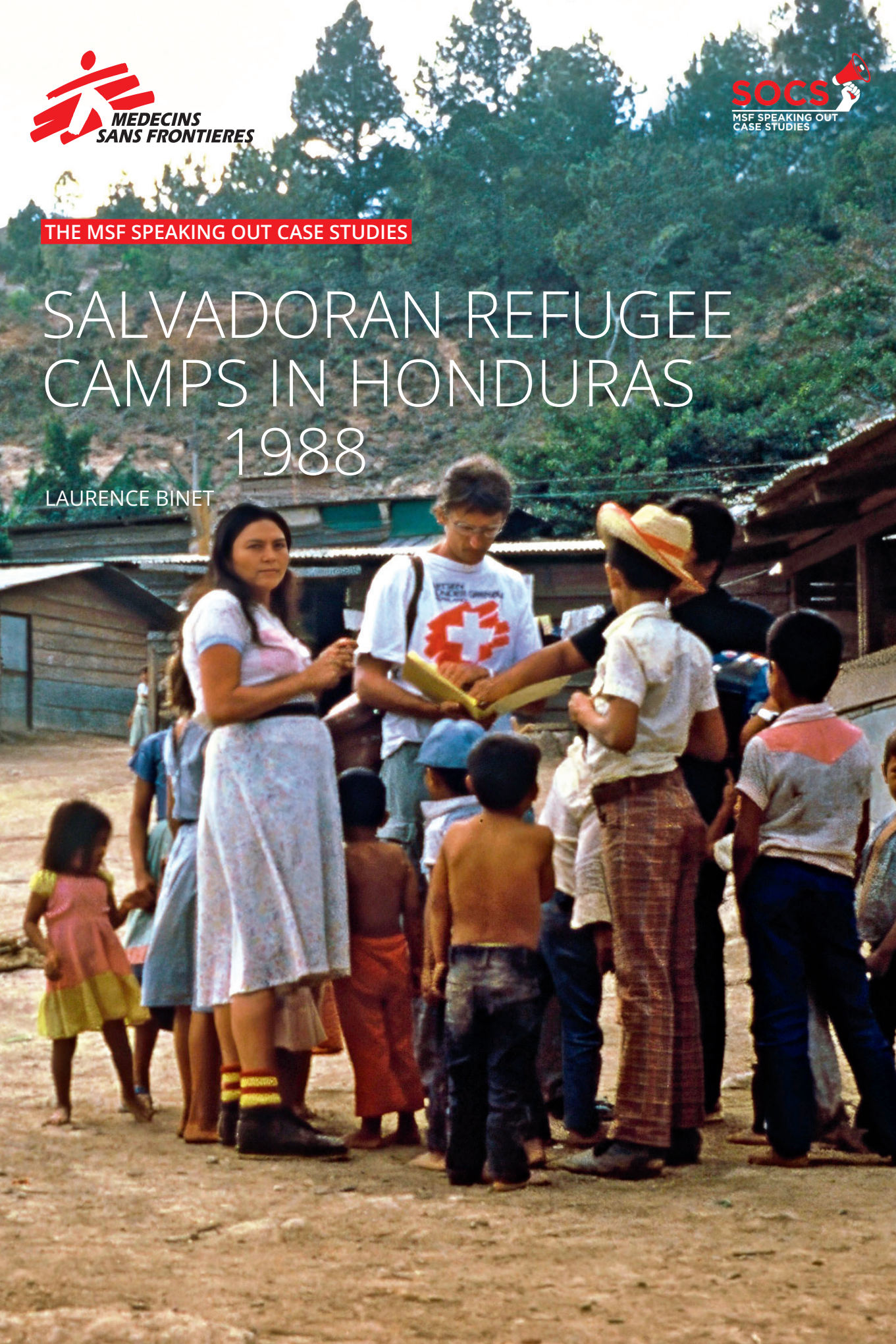
THE MSF SPEAKING OUT CASE STUDIES

SALVADORAN REFUGEE CAMPS IN HONDURAS 1988

LAURENCE BINET



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FOREWORD

This publication is part of the 'Médecins Sans Frontières Speaking Out Case Studies' series prepared in response to the MSF International Council's wish to provide the movement with literature on MSF *témoignage* (advocacy).

The idea was to create a reference document that would be straightforward and accessible to all and help staff to understand and adopt the organisation's culture of speaking out.

It was not to be an ideological manual or a set of guidelines. *Témoignage* cannot be reduced to a mechanical application of rules and procedures, as it involves an understanding of the dilemmas inherent in every instance of humanitarian action.

The International Council assigned the project to a director of studies, who in turn works with an editorial committee composed of MSF representatives chosen by the International Board for their experience and expertise. They serve in their capacity as individuals and do not represent their national sections.

Faced with the difficulty of defining the term '*témoignage*', the editorial committee decided to focus the series on case studies in which speaking out posed a dilemma for MSF and thus meant taking a risk.

The main source of information for these studies is MSF's written and oral memory. This is done by researching documents dating from the period in question and by interviewing the protagonists of the events selected.

The individuals interviewed speak in the language they choose. They offer both their account of events and their assessment of MSF's response. The interviews are recorded and transcribed.

Document searches are conducted in the operational sections' archives and, as far as possible, press archives.

The research is constrained by practical and financial issues, including locating interviewees, securing their agreement, and determining the existence, quality and quantity of archived materials.

The main text details events in chronological order. It includes excerpts from documents and interviews, linked by brief introductions and transitional passages. We rely on document extracts to establish the facts as described and perceived by MSF at the time. When documentation is missing, interviews sometimes fill the gaps. These accounts also provide a human perspective on the events and insight into the key players' analyses.

This methodology aims at establishing the facts and setting out a chronological presentation of the positions adopted at the time. It enables the reconstruction of debates and dilemmas without pre-judging the quality of the decisions made.

Preceding the main texts collected, the reader will find a list of abbreviations, a map, and a summary that lays out the context of MSF's public statements and the key dilemmas they sought to address.

In addition, a detailed chronology reconstructs MSF's actions and public statements in regional and international news reports of the period.

Each case study is available in English and in French.

These case studies were essentially designed as an educational tool. Some are now being used as the basis for podcasts and training modules. To reinforce this educational objective, access to all this material is available on the www.msf.org/speakingout website.

We hope you find them useful,

The SOCS Editorial Committee,
2026

CONTENTS

People Interviewed and Their Position at the Time of the Events 6

Acronyms and Abbreviations 7

Map 8

Summary 9

Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras 1988 11

Chronology of Events 1969-1989 47

PEOPLE INTERVIEWED AND THEIR POSITION AT THE TIME OF THE EVENTS

(Interviews conducted in 2000)

Dr Rony Brauman
MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes

Dr Vincent Jeannerod
MSF France, Coordinator in Honduras 1981-1982

Dr Bernard Pécoul
MSF France, Coordinator in Mesa Grande Camp Programme, then Coordinator in Honduras 1982-1988

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AFP	Agence France Presse
ACNUR	UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [*Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados*]
ARENA	Nationalist Republican Alliance (El Salvador) [*Allianza Republicana Nacionalista*]
CONARE	National Commission for Refugees (Honduras) [*Comisión Nacional de Refugiados*]
ERP	People's Liberation army (El Salvador) [*Ejercito Revolutionario del Pueblo*]
FDR	Revolutionary Democratic Front (El Salvador) [*Frente Democrático Revolucionario*]
FMLN	Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (El Salvador) [*Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional*]
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
Sitrep	Situation report, from the field team to the programme manager, or from the programme manager to other sections or to headquarters' management teams.
UN	United Nations



Salvadoran refugee camps

Nicaraguan refugee camps

SUMMARY

In the 1970s, El Salvador, a densely populated Central American country with its land and wealth concentrated in the hands of an oligarchy, saw the emergence of popular movements calling for reform. The repressive response of the ultra-conservative government and paramilitary groups sparked an armed struggle by people's movements, and the formation of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN in Spanish). At the beginning of the 1980s, the civil war provoked the flight of thousands of Salvadorans to neighbouring Honduras, where they installed themselves in camps near the border.

Médecins Sans Frontières teams began providing assistance to the refugees as soon as they arrived in Honduras. Sympathising with the Salvadoran guerrillas' struggle against a dictatorship, the MSF staff also acted as human rights observers in the camps that were often subjected to violent incursions by the Salvadoran and Honduran armies.

The Salvadoran guerrillas exerted considerable control over the refugees through committees established to manage the camps. They regarded the camps as both an ideological showcase and a rear base for their armed struggle, and thus obliged the refugee population to be entirely devoted to the cause.

In 1987, under the auspices of the Contadora group composed of several Latin American countries, the guerrillas and the Salvadoran government signed the Esquipulas Accords, which provided for a ceasefire, a reconciliation commission and procedures for amnesties and elections. Hard-line factions among the guerrillas, however, regarded the prospect of refugee repatriation to El Salvador, as foreseen in these Accords, as an impediment to victory in the war. Hence the committees began to extend an even tighter grip over the refugee camps.

MSF staff soon clashed with the committees because they refused to meet their excessive demands. The committees wanted MSF to provide certain drugs that MSF considered not only inappropriate but dangerous in the hands of insufficiently trained local personnel. MSF personnel also witnessed violent demonstrations against refugees who wanted to return to El Salvador and other abuses against refugees, sometimes to the point of sacrificing the wounded for political gain, aimed at showing the world the suffering of the Salvadoran people.

The conflict between MSF and the committees came to a head in the summer of 1988 and ended with the withdrawal of all MSF teams from refugee camps in Honduras at the end of that year. The committees' propaganda asserted that they had expelled MSF from the camps due to the organisation's incompetence and insensitivity to the fate of the refugees.

MSF remained discreet about the presence of guerrillas in the camps so as to avoid placing the refugees in danger, but the real reasons for MSF's departure were finally exposed and discussed in the regional and international press.

During internal debates that preceded its withdrawal, Médecins Sans Frontières addressed the following questions one by one:

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

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Extract of document.


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SALVADORAN REFUGEE CAMPS IN HONDURAS 1988

In the 1970s, El Salvador, a very densely populated Central American country, saw the emergence of popular movements calling for a more equitable sharing of its wealth, and especially its land, which were concentrated in the hands of an oligarchy. In 1979 the populist junta in power tried to pursue reforms but was destabilised by the oligarchy, the army and extreme popular movements. The progressive elements withdrew from the government, who, supported by ultraviolent paramilitary groups, reinforced the repression. The popular movements launched an armed struggle, forming the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front [Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional – FMLN].

In 1980, 14,000 Salvadorans began fleeing the civil war[1] ravaging their country and moved into in the refugee camps of Colomoncagua, San Antonio, La Virtud and, later, Mesa Grande in Honduras. These were known as the 'western camps',[2] located fewer than 50 kilometres from the Salvadoran border.

International aid workers (often referred to at the time as 'volunteers') from the French section of Médecins Sans Frontières arrived to aid the refugees soon after the camps were established. They witnessed aerial attacks by the Salvadoran army and violent incursions into the refugee camps by Honduran soldiers.

'Action in the Field and Lack of Political Commitment,' Vincent Jeannerod, ***Le Monde Diplomatique*** (France), May 1985 (in French). **V1**

Extract:
In October 1980, Médecins Sans Frontières decided to come to the aid of the Salvadoran people who were victims of military repression and fighting between the army and the FMLN [Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional] Since the Salvadoran government refused to accept any aid inside the county, Médecins Sans Frontières decided to assist Salvadoran refugees in Honduras. This mission, located along the demilitarised zone between Honduras and El Salvador, was undertaken under the auspices of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which provided partial funding. Over the course of 18 months, a team of 12 doctors and nurses set up and ran a hospital, medical centres and health training facilities. This humanitarian action was carried out in very difficult physical conditions (including rudimentary access and

1 . Twelve years of civil war caused some 50,000 deaths, 500,000 refugees and 500,000 displaced persons from a population of 5.6 million.

2. The refugee camps containing Nicaraguans in the east of the country were known as the 'eastern camps'.

communications and a subtropical climate with its hot and rainy seasons). In addition, the team faced a permanent threat of incursion by the Salvadoran army and extreme right-wing groups in the refugee reception zone. Salvadoran military helicopters flew over the region several times and Salvadoran army contingents, accompanied by paramilitary groups, conducted searches. Honduran officers observed such activity with a welcoming, even complicit, eye.



The refugee camp is caught in a vice, squeezed by the Salvadoran and Honduran armies. Arrogant, confident and unrestrained, Salvadoran forces cross the border whenever they like. The Honduran army keeps the refugees clustered together and carries out the Salvadoran army's dirty work, including violence, terror and repression. The complexity of the situation is very real. The volunteers of three or four recently established NGOs see themselves as human rights watchdogs and potential witnesses, whose very presence will protect the refugees. In fact, on several occasions, MSF and other organisations have played a deterrent role in the face of threats from the Honduran army.

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).



Over a certain period, we heard a lot about sporadic human rights violations, people who were victimised, even killed, as a result of pressure within the camps. The Hondurans were not gentle. They were clearly allied to the Salvadoran (government) and had received a green light from the Americans. It was obvious that the Salvadoran guerrillas had a rear base in the Colomoncagua camp, operating under a fairly authoritarian regime. Although the Honduran army had sealed off the camps, there were constant comings and goings. The situation was extremely tense in and around the camps.

Dr Bernard Pécoul, MSF France, Coordinator in Mesa Grande Camp Programme, then Coordinator in Honduras 1982-1988 (in French).

The search for guerrilla fighters was often a pretext for army incursions into the refugee camps. Although the guerrillas were rarely physically present in the camps, they maintained long-distance control of the committees that officially managed the camps.



At the time, I learned that the committee was made up of three or four people, including an Irishman who was an extreme-left militant married to a Salvadoran woman. In my opinion, he was a former IRA [Irish Republican Army] member who had worked with the guerrillas. I believe the guerrillas had assigned him to the Colomoncagua camp. He lived there but never showed himself. I never saw him in the camp. He had red hair – you couldn't miss him, he was the only redhead around. But I knew of his existence. He had a nickname, and as kind of a test, I would ask to see him from time to time. Then things would shut down! That's impossible! There was no such person. He was clandestine.

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).

The refugees were peasants, so their educational level was quite low. The few intellectual leaders showed up from time to time, but they didn't live in the camps. They were really just a bunch of poor guys, led by a couple of intellectuals. The leaders were Internationals. At that time, there was an overabundance of Internationalists, as they were called.

Dr Bernard Pécoul, MSF France, Coordinator in Mesa Grande Camp Programme, then Coordinator in Honduras 1982-1988 (in French).

While several FMLN groups shared control of the Mesa Grande refugee camp, the Colomoncagua camp was dominated by the ERP (Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo – People's Revolutionary Army), the most militarised faction.

At La Virtud camp, and later transferred to Mesa Grande, there were left-wing Christians, Communists, Maoists and Socialists. This mix was very representative of the FMLN, which ranged from the left to the 'Far East.' I say that because I don't think you can call North Korea a far-left regime – you really can't classify it politically! La Virtud and Mesa Grande were also places where you could find leaders who didn't belong to any monolithic bloc.
The Colomoncagua camp was run by a committee directly linked to Joaquin Villalobos' group, the ERP. Villalobos was an admirer of Kim Il-Sung . His reference points were Albania and North Korea. The committees didn't march under banners with portraits of Kim Il-sung or Enver Hoxha, but those regimes influenced them ideologically. As a result, people were organised based on that social and political vision.

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).

In February 1982, UNHCR transferred refugees from La Virtud camp, close to the border, to Mesa Grande camp some 40 kilometres (25 miles) inland, to protect them from the Salvadoran army's incursions. For a while, refugees in Colomoncagua camp refuse to move. Eventually 4,000 refugees choose to return to El Salvador. MSF accompanies them during relocation. **V2**

'Action in the Field and Lack of Political Commitment,' Vincent Jeannerod, ***Le Monde diplomatique*** (France), May 1985 (in French).

Extract:
Several months later, these camps were moved 15 kilometres (nine miles) further inside Honduras. The goals of the deportation included:
to prevent all direct contact between FMLN combatants and the refugees, thereby cutting off the alleged supplies to the guerrillas, which were never proved.
to give the Honduran army free rein to help the Salvadoran army fight the FMLN.
to prevent new refugees from crossing into Honduras ...

This repressive reorganisation was undertaken against the advice of people working in the field. Refugee representatives never had a chance to speak and the humanitarian organisations (including MSF) that wanted to discuss how this deportation would proceed were either threatened or expelled.

The 1982 transfer of refugees was referred to as 'the deportation'. The refugees had been settled at La Virtud for eight months and had begun farming. They didn't want to leave everything to go to a camp 40 kilometres away, in the middle of a plain, surrounded by barbed wire, completely isolated and under army surveillance. The MSF Honduras team didn't agree with headquarters. The result was that I was not rehired as coordinator. My successor came to oversee medical aid during the transfer and move into the new camp. It was easy to move La Virtud. The camp was open so all they had to do was bring in trucks. People were removed by force.

Dr Vincent Jeannerod, MSF France, Coordinator in Honduras in 1981 and 1982 (in French).

The first stumbling block arose right away around the issue of moving the camps to the Honduran interior. There, in Spanish, they called it "reubicación" (relocation). The refugees and those who supported them – I'd say we also took their side but more cautiously – referred to it as 'deportation'. They were particularly opposed to moving the camp away from the border. La Virtud camp, which was completely informal, was moved fairly quickly. It became Mesa Grande camp, about one or two hours away and around 50 kilometres inside Honduras. There were only footpaths in that area. It took a full day's walk to get from the camp to the border.

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).

The committees completely controlled the refugees. They organised activities in the camps on the basis of collective devotion to the cause, leaving no room for individual choice.

'To prevent backing the guerrilla grip on the camp population, the organisation Médecins sans Frontières gives up assisting Salvadoran refugees in Honduras,' Bertrand de la Grange, ***Le Monde*** (France), 16 November 1988 (in French).

Extract:
There were many statements about forced recruitment in the camps. 'Mothers are called in as soon as their children turn 10 and are strongly encouraged to turn them over to the guerrillas,' a former camp leader told us. Those who refused were subject to severe punishment, including summary execution.

The situation in Honduras was one of total control. Everything was manipulated for political ends. Such-and-such a person had to be recruited. Everyone was interchangeable. The place was as much a factory for the guerrillas as a refugee camp. They produced hammocks and shoes. The 'zapaterías,' or 'shoemakers' workshops,' manufactured walking shoes but you didn't see kids wearing those shoes. None of the young people were older than 12. There were women who were always pregnant and as soon as the boys turned 12 or 13, they would go off to the other side. It was a day-care centre that produced children for the guerrillas... They wanted to build a society where everyone was interchangeable and where the collective put each person to work for the benefit of the whole. In concrete terms, that meant that basic health car was organised along lines very reminiscent of the 1960s and '70s, with health 'brigadistas' chosen according to the criteria imposed by the camp leaders. At MSF we had no possibility to choose people on the basis of their training, their motivation, or their affinity for our volunteers [international staff]. The committees chose the 'brigadistas' and we were responsible for training them. These were primary health care workers with a very strong ideological orientation. Over the course of two or three weeks they were trained, haphazardly, to prescribe medicines or treatments aimed at covering 90-95 percent of the most common illnesses. And then, after a fairly short time – which I believe was to prevent lengthy contact with foreigners – they were assigned to other collective activities. So, after four or five months, a health 'brigadista' would become manager of a shoe workshop and then go on to be a food distributor or the constructor of refugee housing. There was a shadow government, very informal, led by the committees that took responsibility for different social and political activities: education, social life, cooking, sanitation, external relations and security. They had a 'little government'. They were organised in a very Stalinist fashion and they would move the work teams around. For us, it was a source of terrible chaos. The system was doomed in advance because of its ideological orientation.

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).

The MSF staff did not realise the full extent of the committees' grip on the camps.

The teams weren't really aware of this because it was kept secret. Everything seemed transparent because the culture and language were so accessible. But beneath all that, there was a very deep secret, especially at Colomoncagua. Many activities were completely hidden, and the permanent discourse kept people at a distance. They didn't see what was going on because it was hard to see, and no one really wanted to see. And then, too, these incidents were sporadic.

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).

Due to the particularly repressive nature of the Salvadoran government's tactics, many MSF employees sympathised with the cause of the Salvadoran guerrillas.

At the outset the team strongly supported the refugees' cause, or the symbol that the refugees represented. This support was stronger than in the Sudan, for example, or in other refugee camps due to the political and cultural accessibility of the refugees. We could speak to people directly; we did not need an intermediary because everyone spoke Spanish. And it was a classic political situation: people rising up against a far-right military dictatorship. It was easy, and tempting, for the volunteers to identify with this struggle… I loved being there, too. I immediately wanted to take charge of that region because I spoke Spanish and the situation fascinated me. The more I went to the region, the more I loved going. El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua were my favourite places. It's great to go where you can understand what's on the radio or TV and in the newspapers and where you can speak directly with people. You feel at ease. You have real connections with people. It's great.

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).

In the beginning, most of the people who went to Honduras with MSF saw their commitment to humanitarian action as a form of political activism.

Some members of the MSF teams did not arrive in Honduras by accident but organised their way in by introducing themselves as a friend of another team member. This was unquestionably political infiltration by activists. It was not unusual… but it crystallised in Central America more than elsewhere because the political stakes were so clear, and things were so familiar… It was less infiltration than a certain idea people had about MSF. MSF should be on the side of people who are rising up and standing up for themselves. Humanitarianism means being on the side of the forces of progress. No one wants to betray humanitarian principles, but humanitarianism should serve this political ideal. This was a slightly weird point of view, but a classic one… MSF doctors went over to the guerrillas from Mesa Grande. Two or three Spanish doctors disappeared, including a girl who was killed. They joined the guerrillas. They used Mesa Grande as a departure point and headed to Colomoncagua, where they used their own local contacts to cross the border. They disappeared and then came back via Mesa Grande. It was slightly awkward. We didn't know this was going on. I didn't find out until later. I thought their actions were borderline because they put people in danger. But in the end, they endangered only themselves, which is acceptable. They didn't play games. They didn't come back to Mesa Grande waving red flags. When they returned, they melted into the crowd. And then, poof! They'd leave again via Honduras, with no one any the wiser. They cheated a bit on their plane tickets, but everyone said, well, they're doing medicine over there, too.

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).

Developing humanitarian aid in a camp like that was pretty complicated because most of the volunteers there had taken the guerrillas' side. MSF tried to maintain an impartial position in those camps. That was a real tightrope act. At a certain point, we were very involved. Unknown to us, we were supplying doctors to the guerrillas. They left clandestinely, going through MSF channels to join the guerrillas. They used their plane tickets, which MSF paid for, to join the fight. It was a personal choice. One of the volunteers died. She was shot the first time she came back to Honduras from El Salvador. They infiltrated in different places and then

began moving from one zone to another. When I arrived, I was I naive. The situation was explosive. After a while I realised what was going on. We had very good political contacts with the guerrillas. The Mesa Grande camp coordinator, whom I replaced, was living with one of the guerrilla leaders. She was totally involved. She was pregnant. She led people to believe she was returning to Spain, but in reality, she joined the guerrillas. She thought I was going to maintain the links with the guerrillas. Before leaving, she left me the 'keys', that is, the instructions for handling the drugs and for the health education classes that were really political education classes!

Dr Bernard Pécoul, MSF France, Coordinator in Mesa Grande Camp Programme, then Coordinator in Honduras 1982-1988 (in French).

MSF personnel also dropped off medicines at villages close to the border for the guerrillas to collect.

Very soon we started letting small quantities of medicines cross to the other side for the guerrillas without going there ourselves. These drug supplies were left for the guerrillas at a spot where they would come and pick them up. There were soldiers in the village of La Virtud where MSF was set up. They were watching everything. There were probably informers in the village, so we were very careful.

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).

MSF did not aid the guerrillas directly, but we treated all the wounded at the border and there were obviously guerrillas among them. We also dropped off medicines in the villages. Everything was far away, so when a peasant left for a distant village, we would give him a load... One day, Negroponte, the US ambassador, summoned me. He showed me photos of tents and medical supplies with the MSF logo. The photos had been taken in El Salvador in guerrilla-held zones. The guerrillas had obviously made off with supplies and medicines.

Dr Vincent Jeannerod, MSF France, Coordinator in Honduras in 1981 and 1982 (in French).

MSF as an organisation did not, however, support this political activism, which created tensions between the field and headquarters.

From time to time, the [UN]HCR guys would call me to say, "It would be good if you could come." That was the code. Then I knew the volunteers [international staff] had gone too far, that they'd gone to meetings, denounced people... and so I'd go. Sometimes they went too far in terms of the guerrillas. They did foolish things such as provoking the [Honduran] military to breaking point. By 'they', I mean the radicals, the ones who said, "We're here to give the refugees back their voice." The refugees' voice – that was the committees' voice, and the committees were the guerrillas. So, there was a mix of everything. But

there were several future MSF leaders who came through and who had cooler heads. They distinguished between the refugees' interests and the committees' edicts and drew a very clear dividing line between the two. I remember arriving in Colomoncagua once, all alone, with no one to greet me, even in Tegucigalpa. Luckily, I knew the country very well, so I walked from Colomoncagua to the refugee camp. When I arrived people were quite cool, as if asking, "What are you doing here?" "I've come to see what you're doing." And, paradoxically, as we talked, I deepened the division within the team. I was giving people who were trying to avoid being caught up in the prevailing attitudes, certain arguments about humanitarian law and principles. I told them, "This isn't our job. If refugee camps around the world were situated near borders, they would all become political platforms (the term 'sanctuary' wasn't yet in use) and pose immediate danger to refugees..." I clearly remember a meeting in Colomoncagua during which Doris and Sotiris were backed up in their position: someone from Paris arrived who supported the indignation they felt towards the committees, in contrast to the other volunteers who accorded the committees virtually unlimited rights. These latter volunteers took the position that protest or outrage only played into the hands of the death squads and CIA imperialism. It was a very heated ideological discussion. Those were the last fires of that whole period.

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).

Naturally, we tended to be pro-guerrilla, but we quickly denounced their abuses. This was a very dictatorial guerrilla movement. They committed human rights abuses inside the camps. Surveillance was intense. Civilian protection in the camp was based on favouritism. The civilians were in much greater danger than we were. These families faced the threat of the Hondurans, who did not hesitate to shoot.

Dr Bernard Pécoul, MSF France, Coordinator in Mesa Grande Camp Programme, then Coordinator in Honduras 1982-1988 (in French).

The committees wanted to elicit the international community's compassion and ensure its support, so they tried to show that the aid organisations were treating the refugees badly.

In Colomoncagua, the committees starved some kids prior to the arrival of a North American delegation of senators and liberal intellectuals, American progressives. The delegation was coming to play the role of the refugees' protector. They were there to show that the refugees were the 'damned of the earth', first in El Salvador and then in Honduras, that they were being left to starve because they represented a threat to imperialism. When the committees put these malnourished kids on display, the volunteers said, "Where did they come from? There are feeding centres everywhere! There's loads of food!"

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).

In August 1985, Honduran soldiers carried out a deadly raid on Colomoncagua camp. A baby died in the arms of an MSF doctor, who was accused of homicide and thrown in jail by the military. The refugees protested and he was eventually released. V3
During the attack, MSF staff witnessed a group of refugees trying to sacrifice a wounded man to make a martyr of him.

And then there was that incident that really shook things up, when the Honduran army made an incursion into the camps, allegedly looking for guerrillas. The Honduran soldiers – some were drunk, others were driven by hatred and a mixture of xenophobia and anti-Communism – behaved like violent thugs. They fired shots, beat up an old man and kicked a baby in the head. They shot into the ground and in the air. Stray bullets wounded several people. It was like a pogrom, a real attack. The MSF volunteers behaved very courageously and effectively. They immediately intervened, making clear that they had seen everything and were going to report what had happened. They managed to bandage the first person wounded (shot in the right lung) and insert an IV so that he could be evacuated to a nearby hospital. He was barely loaded onto the ambulance when a small commando directed by the committees threw himself on the wounded man and tore off his IV and bandage. They wanted him to die. They were worried that he would be saved. If he was only lightly wounded and then treated by Honduran doctors, their whole victimisation strategy would be weakened, if not completely undermined, because they had, in fact, been attacked. So, they tried to kill the guy. They failed because MSF managed to evacuate him. He wasn't as badly hurt as we had feared. They were able to operate on him and he was saved... This attempted sacrifice shook the medical team, embroiled as it was in politics, activism, and refugee support in the most ideological sense of the word.

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).

In 1986, MSF replaced Caritas as the agency responsible for medical support to all the refugee camps in western Honduras. The teams worked to make the aid management system more rational by following ethical and medical efficacy criteria. They refused to prescribe certain medicines, which led the committees to accuse them of not treating the refugees properly. These complaints became incessant and public.

In a camp of 8,000 refugees, there are normally around 10 health care positions, with 'brigadistas' rapidly trained... When I went into the camps, I reviewed the appointment records – it was outrageous. This had really become a public health problem. They had cardio-active medications and digitalis, drugs that can provoke heart rhythm problems, and herpes cortisone ointment, which can lead to serious complications. They were using everything. Of course, MSF's medication lists were somewhat debatable, but they were a starting point and could be adapted to local circumstances. But putting corticoids, cardio-actives and powerful antibiotics in the hands of people with two weeks' training was just plain irresponsible. So, I came to cut off the drug supplies that were dangerous for the 'brigadistas' to use. I didn't want them to have more than five medications. In truth, I didn't want any 'brigadistas', but it was impossible to question the committees' decision. You couldn't do anything. All you could do was try to keep them from haphazardly using the MSF-provided medicines

that were only to be prescribed by physicians. Neither nurses nor 'brigadistas' can prescribe cardio-active drugs. I forbade the purchase of those kinds of medicines.

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).

Letter from Dr Magdi Ibrahim, Coordinator of MSF France in Honduras, to the Programme Manager, March 1988 (in French).

Extract:
After a period of calm in Colomoncagua, there has been some agitation over the incident of outdated drugs, stirred up from beginning to end by the teniente (supervisor) … Lorena, who I saw at 21.30 after the meeting, had a lump in her throat and was almost in tears. Total manipulation. I think the current climate at Colo is unbearable. It was the major issue at the agencies' last quarterly meeting. I think the famous letter I told you about on the phone arrived at just the right time because one can react. The ACNUR [UNHCR] is moving towards firing the teniente. I just found out tonight that Chantal Messié had a problem at the checkpoint leaving the camp. Apparently, she was summoned two hours later by this famous teniente, who told her he was planning to file a report demanding her departure from Honduras!! I hope this goes no further than words.

'To Prevent Backing the Guerrilla Grip on the Camp Population, the Organisation Médecins Sans Frontières Gives Up Assisting Salvadoran Refugees in Honduras,' Bertrand de la Grange, ***Le Monde*** (France), 16 November 1988 (in French).

Extract:
According to refugee representatives, the conflict began in 1984, when MSF allegedly decided to "change its policy" by reducing the number of drugs available and, little by little, losing interest in patients. In fact, the first signs of tension only appeared in October 1987, when Mesa Grande refugees organised a demonstration denouncing MSF's 'insensitivity' to their problems.

In 1987, the Salvadoran government and the guerrillas signed the Esquipulas Accords, initiated by the Contadora Group (Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama). Including provisions for a ceasefire, reconciliation commissions, amnesty procedures and elections, these Accords raised the prospect of the Honduran refugees' return to El Salvador. But the ERP, the FMLN's hard-line faction, viewed repatriation as a compromise with the Salvadoran government and a possible threat to FMLN victory. Strong-arm tactics were used to threaten and deter the few people who were candidates for repatriation.

Repatriation was an extremely complicated challenge because it could be seen as a victory for the guerrillas, who could claim they had ensured their people's protection, or for the government and army who claimed, "the war is over, and we've won." In any event, this was the beginning of a chaotic electoral process that was not really in place until

after the 1993 San Salvador offensive. It also corresponded with a period of major division between the FDR (Frente Democrático Revolucionario) and FMLN. In 1988-1989, we were in the midst of a political thaw. Guerrilla movements around the world were feeling the effects of glasnost and the weakening of the Soviet Union. In South Africa, Mandela had started to negotiate. It's amazing how quickly that message reached war zones around the world.

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).

After nine or ten years, MSF was no longer in the same frame of mind. The situation was changing, and things were happening in El Salvador. First of all, we had managed to get into various places in El Salvador and Guatemala. We had begun to understand the different groups' political positions. In El Salvador, the Christian Democrats were not as crazy as the far right. That changed our analysis and justified our decision to no longer accept the committees' excesses... Furthermore, Rony and a few others of us at MSF were passionate about that region and had analysed it carefully. In 1988, we were no longer willing to make the compromises we'd made in 1983-1984. It wasn't worth the price anymore.

Dr Bernard Pécoul, MSF France Coordinator in Mesa Grande Camp Programme, then Coordinator in Honduras 1982-1988 (in French).

In March 1988 the far right won the Salvadoran legislative elections and in May the Salvadoran army resumed its offensives in the Chalatenango and Morazán regions bordering Honduras. On 14 June 1988, the Salvadoran Refugee Community of Colomoncagua, Honduras issued a press release announcing its decision to stage a hunger strike to protest "against the repression of the military and the manoeuvres of the UNHCR in Honduras to encourage repatriation."

The original document has not been located but is referred to on p. 15 of Honduras coordinator Dr Magdi Ibrahim's **mission report** of December 1988 (in French).

Extract:
June 14: The 'Salvadoran Refugee Community of Colomoncagua, Honduras' issued its first press release (eight pages), announcing that a hunger strike has begun to protest military repression and UNHCR attempts to encourage repatriation. The document addresses all aspects of assistance, offering general criticisms and reserving the strongest remarks for medical aid.

'Thirty-Three Salvadoran Refugees on Hunger Strike,' ***El Tiempo*** (Honduras), 23 June 1988 (in Spanish).

Extract:
Waldo Willalpando, the UNHCR representative in Honduras, has confirmed that 33 Salvadoran refugees have been fasting since last Friday, but are not on a hunger strike.

On 17 June 1988, 15 refugees began a hunger strike at Mesa Grande.



Original document has not been found but is referred to on p. 15 of Honduras Coordinator Dr Magdi Ibrahim's December 1988 **mission report** (in French).

Extract:
June 17: press release issued by 15 refugees who began a hunger strike today (by June 23, their numbers totalled 35). This two-page document from the Salvadoran Community of Mesa Grande was titled 'A Fast Against Hunger and Repression.' It proposes a nutrition chart (a list of food requirements to be provided to the refugees based on nutritional criteria) that has been revised upward based on their criteria.

On 24 June 1988, UNHCR issued a press release noting that mortality rates in the refugee camps were lower than those among the Honduran population.



UNHCR Press release, ***El Tiempo*** (Honduras), (in Spanish).

Extract:
Concerned with providing information to permit an accurate judgement of the health status of the Salvadoran refugees, UNHCR reports that the infant mortality rate in the Salvadoran refugee camp is 5.04% compared to 8% in the Honduran population, and the crude mortality rate in the camps is 0.36% compared to 0.95% in the Honduran population.



'To Prevent Backing the Guerrilla Grip on the Camp Population, the Organisation Médecins Sans Frontières Gives Up Assisting Salvadoran Refugees in Honduras,' Bertrand de la Grange, ***Le Monde*** (France), 16 November 1988 (in French).

Extract:
The controversy mounted. UNHCR published reports proving that Salvadoran refugees benefited from better health care than the population of their host country. "The Salvadoran refugees are spoiled children," a UNHCR official said. "They receive better rations (2,700 calories/day) than most of the refugees we help on other continents."

On 28 June 1988, 40 people began a hunger strike in Colomoncagua.



Original document has not been found but is referred to on p. 15 of Honduras Coordinator Dr Magdi Ibrahim's December 1988 **mission report** (in French).

Extract:
June 28: hunger strike begins in Colomoncagua with 40 strikers. By 2 July the number had risen to 280! In San Antonio, around 20 people are on hunger strike.

On 30 June and 1 July 1988, MSF and HCR representatives led a marathon negotiating session with representatives of the Colomoncagua committee.

Extract from letter of Dr Magdi Ibrahim, Honduras Coordinator, to the Programme Manager in Paris, 5 August 1988 (in French).

Extract:
June 30: Rony visits Colo – announces the possibility that MSF will withdraw if the committees continue their pressure against us. I had nine hours of discussions afterwards, during which we talked about supplementary feeding and 'vitaminisation' of the supplementary feeding centres. I was opposed to the proposal from [Damaso] Feci of UNHCR who suggested donating vitamins to these centres... The negotiations came to a halt on the first point concerning their 'health' demands: they want a doctor to be in the camp around-the-clock. We refused the Committees' request that we resume the next day (Saturday) – they hoped we would be worn out and they'd win concessions, as happened when UNHCR negotiated food rations on behalf of Caritas.

And then they started again, agitating and demanding medicine, food and high-energy supplements to treat non-existent starving people! Françoise Tholly, the Programme Manager and I found ourselves in a truly extraordinary negotiation in a meeting room in the Colomoncagua camp. It was the rainy season and water was falling hard on the metal roof. The noise was deafening. In spite of the rain, 150 or 200 refugees were holding a sit-in, yelling their slogans, "Tenemos hambre, queremos medicinas!" ("We're hungry, we want medicine!"). The discussion lasted two full days, eight or nine hours each day. When the rain stopped, they started chanting the slogans again, even louder. When the rain resumed, they would take shelter under an awning with their banners. They kept up constant pressure. Some 20 committee representatives, largely women, led the crowd. You had the impression they were a bunch of Maoists from the late '60s. They were saying, "We reject bourgeois academic knowledge," ("el saber académico burgués"). I was accused of promoting it by limiting the doctors' right to prescribe drugs. They were saying that here the people wanted all power, including the power to provide medical treatment; that this was how things worked here and that we were not going to impose our imperialist laws. So, there were negotiations about drugs, doctors and so on. I was there to talk but not to negotiate. Françoise Tholly, who didn't have a political background and wasn't familiar with this kind of language, was very upset. I was exhilarated. In the end, I'd had it because it was exhausting. But it was funny. I recognised the negotiating methods that Moscow and the communists used. They would win the battle by wearing you out and repeating the same thing. They were interchangeable. We weren't. They tried to win by wearing us out, but we didn't have anything to give up. I wasn't going to let MSF give dangerous drugs to people who weren't in a position to use them. There was no negotiating on that subject. So, I put forward the same arguments. At certain points, everyone burst out laughing and then they would turn nasty again. But there was no hatred. There was even something that happened between us."

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).

The medical supply warehouse at the San Antonio camp was looted. The MSF nurse had to face an angry group of refugees. MSF protested.



Dr Magdi Ibrahim, MSF France Coordinator in Honduras, **Mission report**, December 1988 (in French).

Extract:
July 30: attack on the medical supply warehouse in the San Antonio camp; hostile demonstrations against the MSF nurse in San Antonio who, according to demonstrators, "is uncooperative and has a negative attitude"; these events coincided with Rony Brauman's visit to Honduras' western region."



Image and collection of patients' accounts gathered by the refugee committees (cover and narrative) (in Spanish).

Extract:
Statements of patients who were poorly treated by MSF.
I am Genoveva Marquez, 101, from the Vegas sub-camp. I suffer from heart pain and palpitations. The doctors gave me a few tablets but they didn't help. I've suffered from this illness for two years but all they gave me were these tablets. I've been coming to these doctors since 1987 and finally the doctor told me, "I'm not going to give you medicine because you've lived a long time, you're very old, and elderly people like you don't need medical care." He gave me some vitamins, but they didn't agree with me.

On 2 July 1988, the Colomoncagua Refugee Committee published a press release in *El Tiempo* denouncing MSF's refusal to provide vitamins and claiming that UNHCR supported the refugees in this struggle.



Press release from the Colomoncagua Refugee Committee, ***El Tiempo***, 2 July 1988 (in Spanish).

Extract:
From the Salvadoran refugee community in Colomoncagua, Honduras, to the entire national and international solidarity movement, humanitarian organisations, ecumenical religious movements, non-governmental organisations, friendly governments and workers of the world. We would like to draw your attention to press release number 3: Concerning the discussion on the supplementary diet for pregnant women, the malnourished and the sick, MSF decided against the refugees administering vitamins and minerals themselves and have even threatened to withdraw from the programme. The UNHCR delegation from Geneva agreed that it should be us who administer the vitamins.

On 4 July 1988, a refugee from the Mesa Grande camp who was planning to return to El Salvador killed the leader who forbade him from leaving. An angry crowd tried to lynch the refugee along with other members of his family.



Letter of Dr Magdi Ibrahim, MSF Coordinator in Honduras, to the Programme Manager, 5 August 1988 (in French).

Extract:
"July 4, internal security problem at Mesa Grande – a camp coordinator was killed. The three suspects were nearly lynched in the name of 'the people's tribunal.' They survived thanks to protection offered by international workers on the scene (MSF, UNHCR, CARITAS)…"



'To Prevent Backing the Guerrilla Grip on the Camp Population, the Organisation Médecins Sans Frontières Gives Up Assisting Salvadoran Refugees in Honduras', Bertrand de la Grange, ***Le Monde*** (France), 16 November 1988 (in French).

Extract:
A serious event occurred after Dr Brauman left. On 4 July, a refugee assassinated the leader of the Mesa Grande camp, a refugee known by his nom de guerre, Moisés. In the hours that followed, the killer and two members of his family were lynched by an overwrought crowd that attacked the three with clubs and knives. The seriously wounded men were barely saved, thanks to action by representatives of international organisations. At the men's request, they were repatriated to El Salvador.
MSF's president and volunteers (French, but also Belgians, Swiss, Spaniards and Latin Americans) were stunned by this settling of political accounts. Moisés was killed by refugees who no longer wanted to cooperate with the guerrillas.

On 5 July 1988, 281 refugees from the Colomoncagua and San Antonio camps went on a hunger strike.



'Refugees Participate in Peaceful Protest,' ***El Tiempo*** (Honduras), 5 July 1988 (in French).

Extract:
The refugees held rallies and marches inside the camps as an act of solidarity with their 281 compatriots who were conducting a fast. They also demanded a more complete diet and ongoing medical attention.

On 6 July 1988, MSF published a press release in the Honduran newspaper *El Tiempo* noting the possibility of withdrawing from the camps.



Letter from Dr Magdi Ibrahim, MSF Coordinator in Honduras, to the Programme Manager, 5 August 1988 (in French).

Extract:
6 July: MSF press release in the newspaper *El Tiempo*, explaining our position and possibility of withdrawal if we cannot reach agreement and the committees continue to take an extreme position.

On 7 July 1988, the Committee sent a letter to Damaso Feci, a UNHCR official in Geneva, asking that MSF be replaced.



Letter from Colomoncagua and San Antonio Refugees to Damaso Feci, UNHCR Representative for Central America in Geneva, 7 July 1988 (in Spanish).

Extract:
Given the poor medical care provided by MSF personnel, the mistreatment of patients, the lack of concern shown by its staff, the lack of drugs available for the community, the refusal to listen to our complaints concerning its humanitarian assistance, and its threats of withdrawal from the camps. As a recent example, there were no personnel present in the camp during the night of 3 July. As a result, Señora Elia Ramires, 25 years old, from the Vegas sub-camp spent all night in a serious condition without anyone to turn to for help. Given all this we are obliged to ask you to withdraw the agency MSF from the refugee programme, as it is not complying with its humanitarian mandate. We are writing to you because you occupy a position of high responsibility in UNHCR in Geneva and because you have witnessed MSF's attitude first hand. We ask that you contract another humanitarian organisation that is concerned with the medical well-being of refugees as soon as possible.

On 8 July 1988, Rony Brauman and Magdi Ibrahim announced to the refugees that MSF was going to withdraw from the Colomoncagua and San Antonio camps due to the ongoing criticism, unjustified accusations and sporadic physical attacks directed towards MSF. Nevertheless, the team continued to be on-call 24 hours in order to respond to emergencies and provide care for patients with chronic illnesses.



Letter from Dr Magdi Ibrahim, MSF Coordinator in Honduras, to the Programme Manager, 5 August 1988 (in French).

Extract:
8 July, Colomoncagua: informal discussions with several camp coordinators announcing our decision to withdraw from the camp after Damaso Feci received a letter containing false accusations against us. We continue the following activities: on-call 24-hour emergency service from the village; monitoring long-term care patients (asthmatics, epileptics, etc.); follow-up of patients sent to Tegucigalpa for appointments; the distribution of basic drugs to health leaders; and finally, the distribution of several copies of *Tiempo* with our press release.

San Antonio: meeting with the camp committee, which promises to respond to the letter written to Rony during his visit. At present, have requested that UNHCR replace MSF. We announced our decision to maintain only emergency care from Colomoncagua… we distributed several newspapers containing our press release.

I held a meeting in the camp. It was funny. It was a meeting to notify the refugees of our decision. There was tremendous hostility. Around 1,000 people were gathered in a huge amphitheatre. Using a loudspeaker, I told them that various meetings had failed. In the end, they booed me. But when the meeting broke up, several people came up to talk to me and said, "You know, you shouldn't believe that everyone who yelled necessarily thinks that way." Some women approached me, including some who had participated in the earlier negotiation. They confirmed what I knew: "We're not free to do what we want in this camp."

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).

The same day, the public health ministry criticised the committees' negative attitude towards MSF.

'Refugees' Representatives Hinder the Work of Aid Agencies,' ***El Tiempo***, Honduras, 8 July 1988 (in Spanish).

Extract:
There is no logical explanation for the hostile attitude towards organisations as respectable and as professional as Médecins Sans Frontières. There have been attempts to limit their freedom of movement in the camps, goods have been taken from their stores, their staff have been slandered and various forms of sabotage have been directed towards the actions of people and organisations who are only trying to do good.

On 11 July 1988, the MSF coordinator told UNHCR that the organisation had decided to withdraw its teams from the camps.

Letter of Dr Magdi Ibrahim, MSF Coordinator in Honduras, to the Programme Manager, 5 August 1988 (in French).

Extract:
11 July: I asked for an appointment with Waldo [Villalpando – UNHCR representative in Honduras] to tell him about our decision to pull out of the camp after the letter sent to Feci that contained false accusations against the Colomoncagua team. He took note… and promised to monitor the incident (I had to make him a copy of the famous letter; oddly, they hadn't received a copy).

On 14 and 16 July 1988, the Salvadoran Refugee Community of Colomoncagua published two press releases in succession accusing the MSF teams of failing to do their work and UNHCR of abandoning the refugees.



Colomoncagua Salvadoran Refugee **Committee Press release**, 14 July 1988 (in Spanish).

Extract:
From the Salvadoran refugee community in Colomoncagua, Honduras, to the entire national and international solidarity movement, humanitarian organisations, ecumenical religious movements, non-governmental organisations, friendly governments and workers of the world. On 28 June 1988, a hunger strike began for an indefinite period... We declare to the national and international community that our fasting will last as long as the following demands are not met: ...a review of the humanitarian assistance provided by MSF in the camps, which we consider to be totally deficient.



Colomoncagua Salvadoran Refugee **Committee Press release**, 16 July 1988 (in Spanish).

Extract:
From the Salvadoran refugee community in Colomoncagua, Honduras, to the entire national and international solidarity movement, humanitarian organisations, ecumenical religious movements, non-governmental organisations, friendly governments, workers of the world, and all those who are interested in our situation. From 1984 to 1988 MSF's work has been totally deficient. During this entire period the refugee community has not had, and continues not to have, adequate medical care. There is no confidence in MSF's medical personnel, and they have provided no training whatsoever for our personnel. There is only a doctor for San Antonio and Colomoncagua, health workers are not authorised to give drugs, and there are insufficient drugs available, as in previous years. Due to MSF's abandonment, there were 3,767 sick people registered in the month of June alone. We have suffered the death of Clelia Zenaida Ortiz, a six-month-old girl, on 14 July in the Vegas sub-camp, because she did not receive timely medical attention. Given all the above, we sent a letter on 7 July to Mr Damaso Fecci [Feci] at UNHCR in Geneva asking him to replace MSF.

On 22 July 1988, following a long discussion concerning the potential impacts of such a decision on refugee safety, the MSF France Board of Directors decided to close all programmes in Honduras by 31 December 1988.



Minutes of the MSF France Board Meeting, 22 July 1988 (in French).

Extract:
A long discussion took place. The problem can be seen from various angles:
breaking off with one side means taking the other's side. In this situation, the 'other' is the Salvadoran extreme right or the Honduran army.

continuing to work with the committees means working with people who behave like executioners in the camps. We can't ask an MSF team to hide them.
If Médecins Sans Frontières makes public its differences with the committees, the local right-wing and left-wing press and the French press will use it to their advantage and perhaps put the refugees and the teams in danger. If we send journalists into the camps, what will they see? The refugees are afraid and don't talk. If the journalists come back with information they can use, it might provoke the Honduran military to intervene and we would then be responsible for new executions, which would, in turn, further strengthen the committees.
The departure of MSF might be the least dangerous action for the refugees (because it would reduce tensions). Some are shocked that Médecins Sans Frontières is leaving the camps.
FINAL DECISION ACCEPTED BY THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS: to withdraw by 31 December 1988 in a calm and responsible way, in agreement with UNHCR, and giving enough time for a suitable replacement to be found. We will see how the situation develops. Médecins Sans Frontières will not launch a press campaign. The withdrawal will proceed in phases so UNHCR can find a replacement agency best suited to meet refugees' needs.



I was the only one in the field continuously from the early weeks, so I had a deep historical perspective that helped me understand that this wasn't just about high and low points. Every time there was a low point, it was a bit more serious than the one that preceded it. The safety guard on the knife had slipped, so to speak, and the situation was becoming more dangerous in terms of their demands, their violence towards us and the manipulation of humanitarian aid workers. So, I really thought it wasn't possible to continue any longer. For me, it was an imperative. It had become a fundamental issue for MSF. I was completely convinced that we needed to leave and that we'd been manipulated long enough... Francis Charhon, the Executive Director, agreed with me in general but couldn't stand the idea that the committees would defeat us. He thought we ought to find a way to stay. Others played down the committees' actions, saying "but there are refugees with needs, so we should stay". ...That was the only time at MSF when I weighed the pros and cons of staying on as president... I didn't say anything at the time, but if we hadn't left Honduras, I was going to quit. That really ate away at me. I was in the minority because, from a distance, the issue was abstract and complicated to understand. You really had to experience it on the ground and face these people to see the strength and violence of the committees, and their determination, which could lead to death and torture. With distance, you say to yourself, "it's a revolutionary struggle". The Board of Directors was pretty weak at that time. I had my own bottom line, so I hoped the Board would make the right decision. I didn't want fight alone against everyone else from Honduras and Paris. I wanted to give myself a chance. I thought that the fairly long delay was the kind of compromise I found useful to ensure that the final decision was taken. But the decision was made quickly in July. Then there was a huge mess with internal debates. In find it hard to explain what they were about as I found them surreal and absurd. The facts weighed so heavily on me that it was hard for me to debate the issue.

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French)

On 26 July 1988, the MSF Coordinator in Honduras told the local staff of the decision to halt all programmes at the end of 1988.

Letter from Dr Magdi Ibrahim, to MSF medical staff MSF Honduras Coordinator, 26 July 1988 (in Spanish).

Extract:
To: MSF medical and para-medical personnel
For your information, after the meetings held and according to instructions from the President of MSF, Dr Rony Brauman, it has been decided to suspend Médecins Sans Frontières' activities in the refugee camps in Honduras as of 31 December 1988. After working in the camps for eight years, during which we have counted on your collaboration, we very much regret having to hand over to another agency, which will be assigned shortly.

Throughout July 1988, the MSF staff faced a hostile climate in the camps.

Letter from, MSF Colomoncagua Coordinator, to Dr Magdi Ibrahim, MSF Honduras Coordinator, July 1988 (in French).

Extract:
The refugees' new strategy since Monday requires us to see all the patients (on Saturday I would have said that the community health workers didn't know anything, and that MSF was taking responsibility for seeing patients). In addition, troublemakers bother us as we work, upsetting the patients. We face aggressive patients who demand that we give them vitamins or place them in feeding centres, etc. There is agitation on the part of the community health workers, too, who take turns challenging us, saying, "why don't you give me this treatment?" and so on.
Tuesday at the screening, same thing. Max and Carmen left. I saw patients until 4 pm after which I had an appointment with the community and UNHCR. There was a large demonstration organised demanding MSF's immediate withdrawal, saying that MSF had threatened to pull out on 29 June, so they had to withdraw now. They say that there is no longer an accord, so they request UNHCR to find another humanitarian agency. A third letter read and sent to Jean-Pierre Hocké was delivered to HCR. The same kind of demonstration awaited us in Quebrachito and Limones. Team's position after the demonstration: Carmen and Christine don't want to work anymore, don't want to do screening under such conditions (pressure from community health workers and patients). They want to go back to a straight system of emergency care. They think we should continue to work at least until the next negotiations with Leila.

Letter from MSF Colomoncagua Coordinator to MSF Programme Manager, 14 August 1988 (in French).

Extract:
At this point, we think it will be very difficult to salvage a situation that has worsened over the last month. With the coordination and the community calling on us to withdraw immediately, there is no room for discussion. We are under constant attack: community health workers challenge our treatments, insult us, set the patients against us, call us pro-American agents, pressure us physically; provocateurs interrupt medical visits. Don't

forget that this is an attack against the agency, not against the current team, and that we threatened to withdraw on 29 June.
We are working in spite of the situation because we don't think that returning to emergency status until December is the right solution (the health workers refusing to have us see the patients). That would have caused a rapid decline in camp health conditions... Right now, we don't see any solution to the problem, and there seems no point in reconsidering the decision to withdraw at the end of the year. Furthermore, to go back on the demands we have made, with the support of UNHCR, seems even more utopian. We should keep in mind that any discussion with the refugees is blocked right now. They want us to leave immediately, and they are not respecting our five points. Let's hope that our point of view will be taken into consideration during the discussion in Paris.

On 28 and 29 July 1988, the MSF team tried to renew dialogue with the committees.



Letter from Dr Magdi Ibrahim, MSF Coordinator in Honduras, to the Programme Manager, 5 August 1988 (in French).

Extract:
July 28: San Antonio – Meeting with the committee:
considers it unnecessary to respond to Rony's letter ; the nurse, Carmen, no longer has any work to do in San Antonio ; the people are ready to suffer; their only interlocutor is UNHCR, which they will hold responsible for the consequences
...That day they insisted on making their point of view heard: the team must be present in the camp around-the-clock, more medicines must be provided to the health leaders. In addition, they brought out a six-page list, suggesting they are fairly well organised. The contents of the list were quite strange (including equipment for minor surgery and plaster cast supplies), equipment for health centres (no explanation), setting up a nursing school; more supplies for dentists as well as midwives; more health supplies.

At the end, the committee asked MSF to leave the camp. They said that this was a community decision, that the community was ready to suffer the consequences and that UNHCR was responsible for whatever might happen.
July 31: the team resumed night-time call in the camp.

On 10 August 1988, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Jean-Pierre Hocké, asked MSF to consider delaying its decision to withdraw.



Letter from Jean-Pierre Hocké, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, to Dr Rony Brauman, Médecins Sans Frontières, 10 August 1988 (in French).

Extract:
I want to assure you that I understand fully the reasons for your decision to leave Honduras. You should know, however, that UNHCR intends to make every effort to maintain the humanitarian and medical standards that permit it to carry out its mandate.

To that end, we must, at all costs, expand the humanitarian space that has been progressively threatened. MSF's support is thus essential.
That is why we must continue the dialogue that we established together. I would like to appeal to our long-standing and productive collaboration, as well as to the results achieved to date in terms of refugee health, which must be maintained. I would like... the head of the Latin America and Caribbean bureau... to meet with you in Paris to take a close look both at the current situation and at making those arrangements that would allow MSF to delay, if not reconsider, implementing its decision.

On 13 August 1988, MSF staff helped 1,200 Mesa Grande refugees prepare to return to El Salvador. A pamphlet denouncing MSF was distributed.



Dr Magdi Ibrahim, MSF Coordinator in Honduras **Mission Report**, December 1988 (in French).

Extract:
August 13: repatriation day for some 1,200 Mesa Grande refugees; our teams have worked quite well with the refugees over the last few days to prepare for their departure. Just as the convoy was to leave, we were very surprised to see a widely distributed document denouncing the Honduran army's repressive attitude, thanking the Honduran people and the non-governmental agencies for the aid they received, and denouncing Médecins Sans Frontières' anti-humanitarian and mean-spirited attitude! After some hesitation, we nonetheless followed the convoy. Clearly, the Mesa Grande camp, which until then seemed to have been spared what was happening at Colomoncagua and San Antonio, was in step with developments in those two camps.



Leaflet distributed in the Mesa Grande camp on repatriation day (in Spanish).

Extract:
We criticise the anti-humanitarian and mean attitude of the agency Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), who added to our problems by their lack of interest in our well-being.

On 14 August 1988, the refugee committee expelled the MSF team from the Colomoncagua camp. Henceforth the team would have to provide emergency care from outside the camp.



Dr Magdi Ibrahim, MSF Coordinator in Honduras, **Mission Report**, December 1988 (in French).

Extract:
On August 14, the team will be expelled from the Colomoncagua camp, refused access by the refugee committees. As of that date we will see only the emergencies the refugees want us to see, sometimes in the village or at the entrance to the camp.

On 19 August 1988, MSF France's Board of Directors left the door open to a UNHCR-negotiated solution.



Minutes of the MSF France Board Meeting, 19 August 1988 (in French).

Extract:
Honduras: Magdi Ibrahim, Honduras Coordinator, is in Paris and provided a report on the situation in Honduras. He noted that the teams are subject to extreme intimidation. He said that tensions in Colomoncagua risk spreading to Mesa Grande and San Antonio. Brigitte Vasset read the letter from High Commissioner Hocké, who wants to review all possible solutions with MSF before making a final decision to withdraw the teams. The Board of Directors instructed the Honduras managers to hold discussions with UNHCR in the hope of finding a solution.

The Honduran press and the Spanish press reported on the conflict among the committees, UNHCR and MSF.



'Attitude of Refugees Risks Provoking an Epidemic,' ***Heraldo*** (conservative Honduran newspaper), 30 August 1988 (in Spanish).

Extract:
Sources of contamination could emerge near the camps of Salvadoran refugees because they have refused the assistance of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), alleging that the European organisation has not taken care of them properly.

Interviewed in Tegucigalpa, the administrator of MSF, Anne Bugnot, confirmed that they had reached an 'impasse' with the Salvadoran refugees during the last three months, but that they were looking for a solution to the conflict through dialogue with the displaced and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.



Committees' statement published in the Honduran press at the end of August 1988 (in Spanish).

Extract:
The sad exception was the agency Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) whose representatives, both in Tegucigalpa and in Paris, were completely negative and insensitive to our problems, trying to impose their own criteria that has maintained the health of the community in a critical state, and threatening to leave the camps immediately if we do not accept their conditions.



'Salvadoran Refugees Demand the Withdrawal of Médecins Sans Frontières,' ***El Tiempo*** (Honduras), 29 August 1988 (in Spanish).

Extract:
The Salvadoran refugee community based in Intibucá and Ocotepeque are calling for the withdrawal of the French philanthropic institution Médecins Sans Frontières from the camps because it considers that the health care it provides is inefficient.



'Critical Conditions in the Refugee Camps,' Patricia Murillo, ***ABC*** (Spain), 4 September 1998 (in Spanish).

Extract:
Médecins Sans Frontières, a medical and para-medical organisation that has been present in the camps for many years, has been accused of treating thousands of Salvadorans inhumanely and with contempt. The most serious accusation against the organisation is that the personnel that provide medical assistance to the refugees are not qualified medical professionals. Denunciations from the Mesa Grande, San Antonio and Colomoncagua camps state that the refugees are in the hands of 'usurpers' of the title of doctors.



'To Prevent Backing the Guerrilla Grip on the Camp Population, the Organisation Médecins Sans Frontières Gives Up Assisting Salvadoran Refugees in Honduras,' Bertrand de la Grange, ***Le Monde*** (France), 16 November 1988 (in French.)

Extract:
This strengthened Dr Brauman's conviction that MSF could no longer work in the Salvadoran refugee camps. He announced that his organisation would leave Honduras at the end of the year. In the "interests of political balance" and because its presence was no longer required, MSF would also close its programs serving the 23,000 Nicaraguan refugees in Honduras.
Anticipating this decision, the Salvadoran committees demanded MSF's withdrawal. Beginning in mid-August, they denied medical staff access to the camps and demanded that MSF be replaced by a "more sympathetic" organisation. Incidents increased. Armed with studded clubs, the refugees threatened MSF staff. Their jeeps were seized twice. Following suit, the underground guerrilla radio station, Radio Venceremos, denounced MSF on its airwaves as "mercenaries working in the service of US imperialism".

On 2 September 1988, Rony Brauman notified the UN High Commissioner for Refugees that MSF France could no longer respond to the health needs of the refugees due to the harsh treatment directed towards its staff.

Letter from Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France President of Board of Directors, to Jean-Pierre Hocké, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (in French).

Extract:
You are surely aware that the situation has unfortunately not been resolved and that our teams are still prohibited from entering the Colomoncagua and Mesa Grande camps. We can no longer provide any health care, even in life-threatening emergencies: this week, your colleagues had to call a Honduran doctor to Mesa Grande to treat an obstetrical emergency that could have had serious consequences. Faced with such opposition from the refugee committees, I regret to inform you that we can no longer respond to refugee health needs.
We are currently replacing a large part of our teams in the hope that fresh minds will provide stronger support for our efforts to calm the situation in spite of the current difficulties. The fact remains that we cannot ask our volunteers to subject themselves indefinitely to such treatment.

On 6 September 1988, the UNHCR Honduras representative conducted a tumultuous visit to the camps. The committees refused to discuss the 'MSF problem'.

Telex from the UNHCR Honduras representative to Rony Brauman and Frédérique Marodon, MSF Paris, 8 September 1988 (in English).

Extract:
Re: MSF's problems in western Honduras.
First: On 6 and 7 September, the deputy delegate and a health ministry representative led a mission to the Salvadoran refugee camps in western Honduras. They delivered comments to the refugee leadership regarding the letter that Colomoncagua refugees sent to UNHCR. We met with refugee coordinators in three camps and participated in in-depth exchanges.
Second:
AAA: Refugees in the three camps were disappointed and angered that UNHCR is not changing its position. Refugees in all three camps made it clear that their decision to expel MSF from all camps was irreversible and not subject to reconsideration. Accusing UNHCR of failing to take the situation seriously, they also urged the agency to take necessary measures to quickly provide alternative care.
BBB: At the San Antonio camp, refugees held a demonstration, displaying bed-ridden patients to the crowd. These supposedly ill people had been seen walking towards their beds. An elderly woman appeared to be dying. Despite UNHCR's efforts, this woman was not authorised to leave the camp to be examined by an MSF doctor.
CCC: Several thousand refugees at the Colomoncagua camp held a demonstration and also displayed patients. The mood was aggressive and hostile. The refugees accused MSF of responsibility for their past suffering and UNHCR for their current hardships. Although the delegate had been invited to speak to the crowd, his efforts to deliver a coherent message were constantly interrupted by slogans like, 'MSF out of the camps! UNHCR, don't be manipulated by North American imperialism! The people, united, will never be defeated!'
DDD: The refugee coordinators at Mesa Grande were less hostile but no less determined to uphold MSF's rejection. They were in favour of a mission from UNHCR headquarters.

On 12 September 1988, UNHCR issued a press release supporting MSF's position.



Telex from UNHCR Honduras representative to MSF Paris, 9 September 1988 (in English and Spanish).

Extract:
In response to your telex yesterday regarding MSF's problems in Honduras, Bow [the UNHCR deputy representative in Honduras] proposes the following steps:
First: publication of a press release along these lines: The United Nations Commissioner for Refugees acknowledges the Salvadoran Refugees' decision to prevent Médecins Sans Frontières from working in the refugee camps of Mesa Grande, San Antonio and Colomoncagua despite its appeal. The High Commissioner deeply regrets a decision imposed by force which is totally unjustified and that puts the health of the refugee population at risk. Médecins Sans Frontières has participated in the refugee program since the beginning and has largely proven its technical capacity as well as its dedication to the humanitarian cause of assisting refugees. As proof of this dedication Médecins Sans Frontières has confirmed that it will remain available to provide assistance in all the areas where there are refugees until new provisions for their health care have been organised. The situation will be examined by the competent government authorities and UNHCR in order to find an acceptable alternative for the health of the refugee population and the accomplishment of the UNHCR mandate.



'To Prevent Backing the Guerrilla Grip on the Camp Population, the Organisation Médecins Sans Frontières Gives Up Assisting Salvadoran Refugees in Honduras,' Bertrand de la Grange, ***Le Monde*** (France), 16 November 1988 (in French).

Extract:
In the face of this wave of outrageous accusations, UNHCR took a position in support of MSF, stating that it was "impossible to find another equally-competent organisation" in this area and that "no serious organisation would be able to accept the bulk of the refugees' demands". The refugee committees promptly accused UNHCR of participating with MSF in a US-inspired 'plot' to force the refugees to return home.

With the refugee committees demanding MSF's departure, UNHCR searched for a replacement organisation.



Telex from the UNHCR representative in Honduras to MSF Paris, 9 September 1988 (in English).

Extract:
Fourth:
AAA: If the refugees' intransigence was already obvious before this mission, it now appears that the San Antonio and Colomoncagua refugees, in particular, are determined to search for martyrs rather than consider a solution that would involve MSF. On the other hand, refugees must recognise that while their demands may be unlimited,

solutions are limited. Further, whatever the proposed solution, it will not necessarily result in improved health.
BBB: That said, it must be emphasised that UNHCR's current position cannot be maintained much longer without creating the risk of serious health problems that could reach unmanageable proportions. UNHCR must not put itself in a situation where it could be criticised for losing control over health conditions.
Fifth:
AAA: Emergency measures – short-term strategy – MSF must continue to provide services. For the time being, maximum use must be made of MSF staff and infrastructure, even if only outside the camps.
BBB: A technical mission composed of a UNHCR technical expert, a WHO physician (and probably one from the Honduran health ministry) should be announced immediately and set up as soon as possible. It should be noted that the refugee coordinators in San Antonio and Mesa Grande asked that such a mission be formed. This mission should visit the refugee camps to examine: 1) general health conditions and 2) refugee demands and possible solutions that meet acceptable medical standards.
CCC: The refugees are now likely to seek international support for their demands, relying on grim stories about the poor treatment they received from MSF. UNHCR should anticipate this and counterattack with a public information campaign. Bow is preparing a press release that should be distributed as widely as possible.
Sixth: MSF replacement – long-term strategy
AAA: The CONARE [*Comisión Nacional de Refugiados* - National Commission for Refugees, national body in charge of refugee questions inside Honduras] general coordinator stated publicly that MSF is not authorised to return to the camps and that the public health ministry must assume responsibility for refugee health needs. It should be noted that the public health ministry recently sent a team composed of a physician and an epidemiologist to the Colomoncagua and San Antonio refugee camps to examine potential risks that lack of refugee medical care could pose to the Honduran population. This team was warmly welcomed by the refugees in the two camps, who interpreted the visit as a de facto alternative to MSF.

On 23 September 1988, the MSF France Board of Directors confirmed its decision not to speak to the press on this subject in order to protect refugees from possible reprisals by the Honduran armed forces.

Minutes of MSF Board Meeting, 23 September 1988 (in French).

Extract:
The situation in Honduras continues to worsen. The committees' position regarding the MSF teams has become more extreme. Since 19 August, the teams have not been permitted to enter the camps and must see emergency patients outside the camps, at the UNHCR house in Mesa Grande and in Colomoncagua. The guerrilla leaders whom we had hoped to meet have avoided any meetings or contact to date.
We have explained the situation and MSF's attitude to church officials in Honduras and El Salvador and have lit 'firebreaks' in case we need them. UNHCR has taken a public position in support of MSF. Two weeks ago, we decided to withdraw within three weeks if the situation did not improve. This deadline arrives at the end of the month. It appears

there is no other solution. On Monday 26 September, Rony Brauman will meet with UNHCR officials in Geneva and announce our departure.
The refugees' accusations regarding MSF reached as far as a Spanish newspaper. Slanderous articles were previously published in newspapers close to the ARENA party (far right) in El Salvador. The board of directors again raised the problem of whether MSF should reveal the committees' abuses to the press. Because of the risk of reprisals against the refugees, the board reiterated its position: no press release and no press campaign. It is important to remember that the Honduran army would like to get rid of the refugees. For several weeks, even the NGOs opposing us have moved to take our side. They cannot defend the indefensible. Rumour in Honduras has it that other NGOs will follow MSF and become the next targets of the committees' attacks. To be continued.

On 30 September 1988, three members of MSF were victims of an ambush while crossing the San Antonio camp.



Dr Magdi Ibrahim, MSF Coordinator in Honduras, **Mission Report**, December 1988 (in French).

Extract:
September 30: As three MSF members returned from fetching the nurse on-call in the village of San Antonio, they were ambushed by refugees. (The San Antonio camp must be crossed to enter or leave the village.) Given the danger our teams face responding to emergency calls, we decided to no longer respond to them. The confusion continued until early October. At that time, in response to a request from the UNHCR office in Tegucigalpa, the Ministry sent medical teams to replace us.

On 1 October 1988, representatives from the National Commission for Refugees (CONARE) and UNHCR shared with the press their criticism of the refugee committees' refusal to let MSF treat patients in the camps.



'Given the Rejection: Médecins Sans Frontières Withdraws from the Refugee Camps,' ***Heraldo*** (Honduras), 1 October 1988 (in Spanish).

Extract:
The civil servant said that the situation was very tense because the lives of many children, women and old people were at risk due to the whims of the group that controls the camps. He implores UNHCR and the government to change the medical assistance agency.

On 6 October 1988, a commission composed of WHO, UNHCR and Honduran health ministry representatives evaluated the situation in the camps and confirmed that the refugees' health status was satisfactory.

Dr Magdi Ibrahim, MSF Coordinator in Honduras, **Mission Report**, December 1988 (in French).

Extract:
October 6: a three-member commission (comprised of a WHO physician, a physician chosen by UNHCR and a third representing the Ministry) will visit the three Salvadoran camps to evaluate conditions. The commission's report will include recommendations, several of which will address the balance between technical standards and the camps' reality (that is, the Central American reality). As of 19 October, we will be completely discharged of any medical responsibility.

Medical needs were fairly limited. All emergencies could be handled. Thousands of Hondurans lived in the area without medical care. There were hospitals that could accept emergencies and there was a health clinic. The humiliation and violence brought to bear on the MSF team far outweighed the medical challenges. As the committee became increasingly radical, it became impossible to work. The MSF team was denied any independence and dignity.

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).

In mid-October 1988, journalist René Backmann published an article in the French weekly, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, based on reporting conducted in July. In the article, he described the refugee committees as "disciples of Pol Pot". He also described the lynching incident that occurred in Colomoncagua, quoting MSF.

'Salvador Between Two Terrors,' René Backmann, ***Le Nouvel Observateur*** (France), 30 September-6 October 1988 (in French).

Extract:
The little dictators who control the 'peoples' committees' in some of the Salvadoran refugee camps in Honduras look more like Pol Pot disciples than students of Che Guevara. Thousands of exiled farmers are living under a Khmer Rouge-like reign of terror. "I had never seen such a climate of violence and intolerance," says MSF's Christine Durnerin, who also participated in a mission in Beirut. "In the end, I couldn't take it. I left the camp where I was working after trying, without success, to prevent a lynching."

On 17 October 1988, the Honduran press announced MSF's withdrawal.



'MSF Abandons the Refugees,' ***El Tiempo*** (Honduras) 17 October 1988 (in Spanish).

Extract:
The director of Médecins Sans Frontières, Magdi Ibrahim, confirmed yesterday that the health and sanitation activities in the refugee camps in the country would be suspended as of 31 December. The director regretted this withdrawal from the refugee camps. He said that the health norms in the camps that followed the World Health Organization's recommendations did not satisfy the refugee leaders who demand drugs that they are unable to prescribe and handle.

On 18 October 1988, the committees announced in the Salvadoran press their decision to expel MSF.



Press release from the committees, ***El Mundo*** (San Salvador), 17 October 1988 (in Spanish).

Extract:
The Salvadoran refugees in Honduras denounce to the Salvadoran people, human rights organisations and the international community: Given the negligence of the work of the French agency "Médecins Sans Frontières" we, the refugees, have decided to expel them from the programme.

On 21 October 1988, the MSF Board of Directors was notified that the teams would leave the Honduran camps on 15 November. In the following weeks, medical staff sent by the Honduran health ministry gradually replaced MSF teams.



Minutes of the MSF France Board Meeting, 21 October 1988 (in French).

Extract:
Official announcement of Médecins Sans Frontières' departure. We are leaving the western camps on 15 November. A logistician will remain on-site near each camp to resolve remaining problems. The three-person commission that came to evaluate the situation in the camps found the refugee health status is satisfactory, but hygiene is terrible. The refugees accepted the commission, which proposed an emergency plan: medical visits and vaccinations after January, a Honduran physician will be in the camp, supervised by one of the agencies already present to avoid complicating the situation UNHCR is more favourable of the Honduran Red Cross. An announcement was made in El Salvador on 18 October that the refugees had decided to expel MSF!

Regarding the 'press campaign', René Backmann's article in the *Nouvel Observateur* described conditions in July (lynching, etc.). René called the committees the equals of Pol Pot. *Le Monde*'s correspondent, B. de la Grange, will "arrive in Honduras soon".
Public opinion about the refugees is at its lowest. Locally, the press calls them guerrillas. New development: an open war rages inside the Mesa Grande camp. Some 1,500 people are to be repatriated. Some refugees are asking that MSF remain. The team no longer wants to leave Mesa. Contact has not been cut off because the refugees continue to be treated outside the camp.

On 16 November 1988, the French daily, *Le Monde*, published an article by its Central American correspondent, Bertrand de la Grange. The article, run under the headline "To Prevent Backing the Guerrilla Grip on the Camp Population, the Organisation Médecins Sans Frontières Gives Up Assisting Salvadoran Refugees in Honduras", describes in detail how the refugee committees are systematically bleeding the camp population and recounts the conflict between the committees and MSF's teams.



'To Prevent Backing the Guerrilla Grip on the Camp Population, the Organisation Médecins Sans Frontières Gives Up Assisting Salvadoran Refugees in Honduras,' Bertrand de la Grange, ***Le Monde*** (France), 16 December 1988 (in French).

Extract:
However, confrontations between the armed forces and the guerrillas have increased since the beginning of the year. The latter benefited from the refugee camps' presence nearby. The crisis between Médecins Sans Frontières and the three Salvadoran refugee committees in Honduras – Colomoncagua, Mesa Grande and San Antonio – had been brewing for a long time. The refugee camps served, in effect, as sanctuaries for FMLN guerrillas, providing the fighters with combatants, medicine and uniforms produced in camp workshops. For the system to operate properly, the foreign NGOs working in the camps, which were under UNHCR coordination, had to collude in the process.
Médecins Sans Frontières, which had been working in Honduras for eight years, wanted to limit its involvement in the Salvadoran conflict to meeting medical needs. Neutrality was unacceptable to the committees and the FMLN, which was the source of the crisis...

What was the source of the relentless opposition to MSF? "It's a political problem," said Dr Alain Destexhe, currently visiting Honduras on behalf of MSF. "Unlike the other NGOs in the camps, we always maintained a certain distance from the refugees' political involvement or, I should say, from the committees' involvement," Dr Brauman said. "The committees don't want anything more to do with MSF because we are the only ones not openly supporting their cause."
The FMLN agreed to the repatriation of the Mesa Grande refugees because the camp's distance from the border (40 km, or 25 miles) limited its strategic value. That is why over the last 12 months more than 7,000 refugees of the 11,000 living at Mesa Grande in October 1987 were able to return to El Salvador. They departed in three waves. The Front took the opposite position in Colomoncagua and San Antonio. Those camps were very close to the border, so people were constantly coming and going to and from El Salvador. Honduran authorities recognised that they could not intercept the 'refugees' leaving for or returning from combat.

The FMLN had to have refugees available to it. The committees were charged with strictly enforcing orders from above – by any means necessary – on this issue as on all others. According to a knowledgeable witness, a committee member from that period, five refugees were executed in 1985 in Colomoncagua following disagreements with Osmin, the FMLN representative in the camp. To maintain their control over the refugees, the committees cultivated a climate of ongoing mobilisation. Using sharpened sticks, they dug out and built fortifications to defend themselves against an imminent 'transfer plan' that the Honduran army was supposedly about to implement to move them away from the border.
The committees identified those people likely to leave and inspected mail. They relied on various forms of intimidation to prevent them from leaving, including reducing or denying food allocations. They also insulted, punished and systematically harassed people. These conditions prevented a UNHCR representative from fulfilling his role as protector of the refugees' right to repatriation. "We had to agree to night-time departures in the hope of slipping past the committees," he told us. "From that point we, too, were attacked physically on order of the committees."
"It's true, we did not support repatriation in general because the war was not over and conditions were not in place for our return to El Salvador," acknowledged Rosalie, then a member of the Colomoncagua committee. Many refugees still recalled army atrocities.

UNHCR bears some responsibility for the worsening situation in the refugee camps. Several of the UN agency's officials acknowledge that they erred in acceding to most of the demands made by the refugees, who were manipulated by the committees. Among the solutions being considered was finding a third country to accept those who no longer wanted to stay in the camps but feared returning to El Salvador. Several countries, specifically the US and Canada, might have responded positively to UNHCR efforts in this regard.

But the committees could count on the support of very powerful NGOs, like Caritas and, in particular, Catholic Relief Services, which were charged by UNHCR with humanising the key aid programmes in the camps (including education and production workshops). "The most outrageous thing is that humanitarian organisations were complicit in this system of oppression," a doctor said. "Humanitarian aid led in the end to strengthening the committees' power and transforming the camps into little gulags." MSF preferred to throw in the towel.

As it happened, Bertrand de la Grange and René Backmann were in El Salvador. Backmann was already a good friend and I told him the reasons for the decision. He was working primarily on the guerrillas, so he was aware of the situation but somewhat marginally. De la Grange, who was a correspondent in Mexico and covered Central America, was very interested in the story. He was an outspoken liberal anti-communist. He wasn't a far-right guy, but an anti-communist. He visited the camp, but I didn't meet him there because I didn't want to be seen with him. We met up in Tegucigalpa. I told him about the problems we'd faced but I played things down. He wasn't fooled. He really knew everything about the region. He spoke Spanish like French and he read everything that came out of there. He was very up to date. So, he wrote a very fair article, but more political than we might have liked.

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).

The Honduran press picked up the information in the *Le Monde* article. Committee representatives referred to it in a statement addressed to MSF.



'According to a Salvadoran Organisation, the Refugees Expelled MSF', **AFP** (France), 16 November 1988 (in French).

Extract:
On Tuesday, the CNR (National Coordination for Resettlement) announced that the French humanitarian organisation Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) was expelled from Salvadoran refugee camps in Honduras for "failing to treat" exiles. The CNR, which coordinates refugee activities in Honduras, rejected the claims of MSF staff that the organisation could no longer perform its work because of the control exerted by the committees over the refugee population. "The refugees expelled MSF because they were not receiving the necessary care," said CNR leader Inocente Orellana. Around 14,000 refugees are housed in the Mesa Grande, Colomoncagua and San Antonio camps. Some 20 physicians working in those camps will leave Honduras by 31 December, according to the group's officials, who reported "significant political tension" inside "the Honduran concentration camps". Orellana accused MSF of "failing to provide medical care to ill persons, being negligent in dealing with the transfer of patients to hospitals in the capital, Tegucigalpa, and, in many cases, refusing to provide medication". He further described MSF's statements that FMLN guerrillas are "manipulating' refugees as 'completely false".



Communiqué from the Mesa Grande Refugees in Response to the MSF Accusations Made in ***Le Monde*** (France), ***La Tribuna*** (Honduras), 21 November 1988 (in Spanish).

Extract:
We condemn MSF's totally false and tendentious accusations. We would like to make it clear that this agency did not withdraw from assisting the refugees but was expelled by the Salvadoran refugee community in Colomoncagua, San Antonio and Mesa Grande. The reason for this expulsion was the dissatisfaction of thousands of Salvadoran refugees with the inadequate work of MSF and their failure to improve this situation. MSF's accusation that "the committees comply with orders from above" shows how little the agency understands in suggesting that we are incapable of making our own decisions. This accusation seems to come from an agency dedicated to spying or military intelligence... We do not recognise in MSF any moral competence to have an opinion on problems... We are grateful to a small group of MSF workers who understood the humanitarian character of their work and who did not agree with the decisions of the management of the private agency. We are grateful to the people and government of France whose donations helped alleviate our suffering.

On 26 November 1988, *Le Monde* published two responses to de Bertrand de la Grange's article. Rony Brauman's made clear that MSF's withdrawal was based not on a guerrilla presence in the camps but on the committees' harassment of the teams. Antonio Martínez-Uribe, European representative of the FDR-FMLN's political-diplomatic commission, denounced MSF's position.



Letters to the editor, 'Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras', ***Le Monde*** (France), 26 November 1988 (in French).

Extract from Rony Brauman's response:
I would like to make clear that our forced retreat from these camps was due only to recent harassment of our teams by these 'committees'. I do not know if there are guerrillas in the camps. In any event, their presence would have no bearing on the work we can do there. What undermined eight years of uninterrupted presence were actions that René Backmann described in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, and that "reminded him strongly of the Khmer Rouge". The 'committees' rejected MSF because the organisation refused to become their tool. With a heavy heart we had to leave the refugees who must pay the price, yet again, of a radicalism that is not theirs.

Extract from Antonio Martínez-Uribe's response:
Regarding MSF, it is difficult to understand the actions of a humanitarian organisation that abandons its work so as not to appear friendly towards a guerrilla movement like the FMLN and that denounces other organisations, including one led by the Catholic Church, as favouring the guerrillas and the system of oppression. MSF's opposition can only be understood as taking a position in favour of one of the parties to the conflict.



On the other side of the border, the death squads were very busy. They all came from the same mould, and they knew each other... we didn't want our announcement to be used for police or military purposes, which would have been disastrous. That's why, after the Bertrand de la Grange article, I obfuscated a bit and spoke a little naively when I said, "We don't know if there are guerrillas in the camp". He laid everything at the feet of the guerrillas, and he was right. But at MSF, we didn't think it was our job to get involved in such sensitive territory... We certainly didn't want to be responsible for potentially perverse uses of our statements, so we kept a low profile, which put us in a very awkward position... We took a low-key position that did not reflect the gravity of the problem.

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).

In a late December 1988 article in the French daily, *La Croix*, Chantal Messié, MSF Medical Coordinator in Colomoncagua, refused to confirm that the committees had willingly starved children to turn them into martyrs. She said only that she no longer wished to work with MSF "after what happened".



'After MSF's Departure from the Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras: the Presumed Limits of Humanitarian Aid', Alain Hertoghe, ***La Croix*** (France), December 25-26 1988 (in French.)

Extract:
The denials of Chantal Messié, MSF's Colomoncagua coordinator until late October, are even more troubling. Still in the village next to the camp, she refused to confirm the serious charges made by her former employer. "There were plenty of practical reasons justifying our disagreement with the committees... But I have no concrete information

regarding the two deaths, the dehydrated children and the suicides... We should not have allowed ourselves to be forced out like that without trying to have dialogue." [...]
According to the staff of other humanitarian aid organisations working in the camps, MSF's approach was the source of friction with the committees. "They clashed with the refugees because MSF wanted to limit itself to medical assistance," explained a European volunteer who lived in the camps for four years. Unlike the other organisations, MSF did not encourage refugees to take responsibility for themselves, while the committees were always asking that more health staff be trained. "The MSF people stayed only six months and kept their distance from the refugees," said Father Denis Leder, a North American Jesuit living at Colomoncagua. "They were suspicious of the health assistants. They refused to make medicine available to the assistants because, according to MSF, they would take the medicines to the guerrillas as soon as their training was over."

In January 1989, the last MSF international staff left the Nicaraguan refugee camps in La Mosquitia region and Danli. MSF continued its work in El Salvador.
In the 12 September 1988 edition of the Belgian daily newspaper, *Le Soir*, a UN official in Latin America denounced, among other developments, the committees' control of the Salvadoran camps and UNHCR's impotence in the face of the situation.



Bruno Van Hoorebeke (sociologist, UN official in Latin America, 1982-1989), 'UN Connection in Central America,' ***Le Soir*** (Belgium), 12 September 1988 (in French.)

Extract:
In western Honduras, the Salvadoran refugee camps are under the iron-fisted control of hard-line committees representing the FMLN's most extreme wing (Pol Pot leanings). These committees terrorise the refugees, mostly simple peasants, and lay down the law both to the volunteer aid organisations and to UNHCR, which is unable to compel the committees to respect the organisation's founding principles of neutrality, which requires it to be non-political... At the end of 1988, the group Médecins Sans Frontières decided to leave Honduras rather than yield to pressure from the 'Committees'. The Salvadorans have the right to an international official for every 1,000 refugees, while in the Sudan, Ethiopia and Pakistan, a few field officers are responsible for millions of refugees.

At the end of 1989, the same committees that rejected MSF one year earlier agreed that the agency would provide repatriation medical care to all Salvadoran refugees in the Honduran camps.



Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France President of Board of Directors, in MSF France's **Annual Report**, November 1988 to November 1989 (in French.)

Extract:
Our departure from Honduras last year created a lively debate, given the ethical and political problems it posed. I only mention that mission today because we closed it last January in a climate that was certainly easing but remained appalling. Today all the

refugees are preparing to leave Honduras to return to El Salvador and it is, in principle, MSF that will provide health care during the return, with the agreement of the same committees that blocked our access to the camps one year ago.

That didn't keep us from continuing our work on the other side of the border, in El Salvador, where MSF teams were working officially with displaced people. MSF was also unofficially recruiting doctors who were leaving for El Salvador to work for the guerrillas. Those doctors were relying partially on MSF funding but were not working under the organisation's formal sponsorship. I went to see them several times as I was going through El Salvador and twice through Honduras. Later no one crossed except through El Salvador to avoid mixing work in the camps and work connected to the guerrillas. It was easier, too. After our final departure from the Honduras camps, we continued working in El Salvador and they were respectful of us. A year later, when all the refugees had returned to their country, we sent teams of MSF volunteers based in El Salvador to Colomoncagua, San Antonio and Mesa Grande to provide medical support. The refugees were pleased. They welcomed us and there were no problems.

Dr Rony Brauman, MSF France, President of Board of Directors 1982-1994 and Director of Central America Programmes (in French).

CHRONOLOGY OF EVENTS 1969-1989

The main purpose of this chronology is to help the reader by reconstructing MSF's actions and public statements in regional and international news reports of the period. It is intended as a tool for this specific document, and not as an academic reference.

	Central America	MSF and Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras
1969	The '100 Hours' or 'Soccer' War (fighting broke out in sports stadiums) between El Salvador and Honduras; tens of thousands of Salvadoran immigrants return home; increasing pressure around land and heightened social tensions in El Salvador.	
1970	Armed struggle resumes in El Salvador.	
1975	Guerrilla forces organise and expand their presence in the Salvadoran countryside – increased repression, particularly by paramilitary groups.	
1976	Agrarian reform in El Salvador stalled	
1979	**19 july 1979** Victorious 'Sandinistas' arrive in Managua, Nicaragua's capital. **15 october 1979** Overthrow of Salvadoran government elected in 1977 – populist junta forms, tries to pursue reforms but is destabilised by guerrillas, the oligarchy, and the army.	
1980	Progressive elements withdraw from the junta because of repression – upsurge in number of death squads – cycle of violence accelerates – creation of FDR, bringing together left-wing organisations and popular movements. **24 march 1980** Archbishop Romero of San Salvador, a vocal critic of the government, social injustice, and human rights abusesis assassinated – state of siege declared in El Salvador. **14 may 1980** Salvadoran army massacres Salvadoran refugees at the Sumpul River along the Honduras-El Salvador border. **October 1980** First wave of Salvadoran refugees in Honduras – the FMLN is formed, bringing together the five main guerrilla movements.	**October 1980** MSF begins providing medical assistance in La Virtud and Colomoncagua refugee camps for Salvadorans in Honduras.
1981	**January 1981** Ronald Reagan, elected President of the USA, takes over from Jimmy Carter – US military aid to El Salvador increases from $10 million to $35 million.	

	Central America	MSF and Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras
1981	**January 1981** FMLN's final offensive fails – civil war breaks out in El Salvador. Honduras accepts Salvadoran refugees, who are placed under army surveillance. **March 1981** Salvadoran army massacres Salvadoran refugees trying to cross the border at the Lempa River.	
1982	**First six months 1982** Wave of Miskito and Suma refugees from Nicaragua arrive in the Mosquitia region of Honduras.	**February1982** Forced closure of La Virtud border camp and relocation to Mesa Grande – 4,000 refugees choose to return to El Salvador. MSF accompanies them during relocation.
1983	Republicans win US congressional elections – reinforcement of US support for the Salvadoran government – start of US support for the 'Contras', anti-Sandinista movement in Nicaragua.	
1984	**May 1984** Christian Democrat José Napoleón Duarte elected president of El Salvador. **October 1984** Opening of dialogue between President Duarte and the FMLN-FDR – talks break off three months later.	**January-July 1984** Honduran military assassinates at least 20 Salvadoran refugees. **June 1984** Bodies of 14 Salvadorans found 25 km from the Mesa Grande camp. **September 1984** Transfer of refugees to Olanchito (Yore, central Honduras) is cancelled after committees' protest.
1985	US military aid to the Salvadoran government increases to $200 million.	Refugee committees become more radical. **August 1985** In Colomoncagua, committees try to create a martyr by killing a refugee wounded by Honduran soldiers – five refugees who disagree with committee leaders killed.

	Central America	MSF and Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras
1986		MSF takes over medical care in all camps from Caritas – alternating periods of tension and calm between MSF and the committees.
1987	**October 1987** Esquipulas Accords signed by the Contadora Group (Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Panama) propose a framework for peace agreements in the region, including a ceasefire, reconciliation commission, amnesty and elections for El Salvador. **November 1987** The FDR pulls out of the FMLN and returns to El Salvador to take part in the political debate.	**October 1987** Refugees in Mesa Grande demonstrate against MSF's 'insensitivity' toward their problems. The first 4,500 Mesa Grande refugees repatriated to El Salvador.
1988	**March 1988** Far-right victory (ARENA) in the Salvadoran legislative elections. **March 1988-March 1989** War of attrition between FMLN and Salvadoran armed forces – incidents on Honduras-Nicaragua border – arrival of 2,000 US soldiers in Honduras. **End of may 1988** Salvadoran military offensives in the border regions of Chalatenango and Morazán.	**June 1988** Hunger strike organised by Colomoncagua and then Mesa Grande committees begins. **24 June 1988** UNHCR press release: 'Mortality rates in refugee camps lower than those of the Honduran population'. **30 June-1 july 1988** Marathon negotiations between MSF and the refugee committee in Colomoncagua. **July 1988** 'War of the press releases' between the committees and MSF begins (continues until MSF's departure).

	Central America	MSF and Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras
1988		**4 july 1988** A director of the Mesa Grande committee is assassinated by refugees who no longer want to work with the guerrillas – the killer and two family members are lynched. **7 july 1988** MSF receives a copy of a letter from the committees to UNHCR demanding that MSF withdraw from providing refugee assistance **8 july 1988** Rony Brauman, President o of MSF France Board of Directors, announces MSF's withdrawal from Colomoncagua and San Antonio refugee camps. **22 july 1988** MSF's Board decides to pull out of the camps on 31 December 1988 and not to undertake a press campaign. **30 July 1988** Demonstrations against MSF nurse in San Antonio – San Antonio medical warehouse attacked. **13 August 1988** MSF assists with repatriation of 1,200 Mesa Grande refugees – committees distribute a leaflet criticising MSF. **14 August** MSF team expelled from Colomoncagua camp – outside group takes over emergency care. **2 september** MSF warns UNHCR that its teams can no longer meet refugee health needs because teams are being threatened. **6 september 1988** UNHCR sends representatives to talk with the committees about 'the problem with MSF'.

	Central America	MSF and Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras
1988		**23 september 1988** MSF Board confirms its decision not to publicise its withdrawal from the Salvadoran refugee camps in Honduras. **30 september 1988** Three MSF workers who have gone to pick up the on-duty nurse in San Antonio are ambushed – MSF decides not to answer emergency calls any longer. **Mid-october 1988** René Backmann's article in the French magazine, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, compares Salvadoran guerrillas to the Khmer Rouge. **18 october 1988** Committees announce in the Salvadoran press that they have decided to expel MSF from the camps. **21 october 1988** MSF Board announces departure from the Salvadoran camps on 15 November. **16 november 1988** Bertrand de la Grange's article in the French daily *Le Monde*: 'To prevent backing the guerrilla grip on the camp population, MSF gives up assisting Salvadoran refugees in Honduras.' **26 november 1988** Rony Brauman's response in *Le Monde*: "I do not know if there are guerrillas in the camps." **26 december 1988** Alain Hertoghe's article in the French daily *La Croix*: Rony Brauman accuses the committees of wielding totalitarian control over the refugees.
1989	**March 1989** Alfredo Cristiani (ARENA = far right) elected as president of El Salvador.	**January 1989** MSF withdraws from Nicaraguan refugee camps in Honduras.

	Central America	MSF and Salvadoran Refugee Camps in Honduras
1988		**12 september 1989** An article by a UN official in the Belgian daily, *Le Soir*, denounces the committees' grip on the camps, and UNHCR's powerlessness. Mentions MSF. **Last quarter 1989** MSF takes over medical care of massive numbers of Salvadoran refugees returning to Honduras.

The MSF Speaking Out Case Studies is a series of studies from Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) that openly examine and analyse the organisation's actions and decision-making process during complex humanitarian interventions focusing on dilemmas surrounding speaking out.

The methodology aims at establishing the facts and setting out a chronological presentation of the positions adopted at the time. It enables the reconstruction of dilemmas, constraints and controversies without pre-judging the quality of the decisions made.

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