The victims of the conflict in Kosovo were not only Albanians and Serbs. "Collateral damage" affected humanitarian organisations as well!

Summary of events

From the outset of hostilities, and before the massive influx of Kosovar Albanian refugees into Albania and the Yugoslav Federal Republic (YFR) of Macedonia, a large number of humanitarian organisations were mobilised. Médecins Sans Frontières put operational responsibility for the region in the hands of three sections: MSF-Holland for YFR Macedonia; MSF-Belgium for Albania and MSF-France for Montenegro. Other sections, such as MSF-Greece, linked their operational potential to this action plan. In parallel, MSF-Greece organised preparations on Greek territory for the reception of Albanian refugees (which never happened in the end). Dozens of Greek volunteers were mobilised to come to the aid of the Albanians and dozens of tons of material were sent to the refugee camps.

As the weeks passed and the bombing intensified, our concern grew for the fate of the populations within Kosovo and Serbia. The contrast between the deployment of NGOs in Albania/YFR Macedonia (a total of over 120 NGOs) and their absence from among the populations suffering the bombings became both obvious and unacceptable. However, access to Serbia was practically impossible.

During this period MSF-Greece made its position known publicly on several occasions. In each case the policy of ethnic cleansing by the Belgrade regime was condemned, but so too was the NATO bombing of non-military targets. For example, attached to this text is an article by the Honorary President of our section denouncing Milosevic's regime as being mainly responsible for this war (annex 1) as well as an interview with the Acting President after his return from a mission to Kosovo (annex 2).

The situation changed towards mid-April when, through the intervention of the Greek government acting in agreement with the European Union, a "humanitarian corridor" was established with the consent of both belligerents. According to this agreement, NATO agreed not to bomb humanitarian convoys which they received warning about and which followed a given itinerary and timetable, while the Serb authorities agreed that convoys would be allowed to enter and move towards destinations selected by the NGOs. The humanitarian organisations using the corridor would do so on their own responsibility and in total independence of the Greek government. This humanitarian corridor became operational as from 26 April.

MSF-Greece immediately informed its Belgian, Dutch and French partners of this possibility. The Greek organisation proposed to the other sections that a mixed team should be created with co-ordination ensured by one of these sections. This proposal was not followed up. Meanwhile the Operations Department of MSF-Greece applied for visas from the Serb Consulate in Athens. The applications were accepted on 4 May and the Greek Director of Operations informed the other sections asking them to join with us. A great deal of pressure was then put on MSF-Greece to cancel its project. The reason given was that "the Greeks lacked impartiality" and that only the Belgian section was authorised to enter Serbia on behalf of MSF. James Orbinski,
President of the International Office (Bl), also assured us that visa requests had been made by the Belgian section and that we must wait until this section received authorisation to enter Serbia. Our response was that we could delay our mission by one or two days, but that, given the urgency of the situation, it was ethically unacceptable to wait longer. Our mission therefore entered Kosovo on 7 May 1999.

This mission was composed of three doctors (the President of MSF-Greece, a second surgeon and a Greek Serb-speaking doctor so that we would not have to depend on a local translator) and a technician-logistician. Apart from the Serb-speaking Greek doctor, the members of this mission already had much experience, acquired mainly with the French section of MSF. The mission had been prepared by telephone calls, mainly with doctors in Pristina hospital and the emergency hospital in Belgrade. The objective of the mission was, on the one hand, to bring in first aid material on the basis of the information available (a total of 18 tones, i.e. a relatively small quantity) and, on the other hand, to evaluate the situation from the point of view of the medical needs and the space for humanitarian manoeuvre (i.e. free access to victims). Every movement by our mission was recorded in daily written reports and these reports were sent to the other sections. Our mission’s activities were covered by independent Greek journalists as well as by Canadian, Italian, French and other journalists. From the outset the Serb authorities asked us to hand over our aid to the Yugoslav Red Cross. Our reply was categorically negative and our material was handed over to the doctors in the Pristina and Belgrade hospitals. Part of our team (a doctor and the technician) remained there until the end of the conflict in order to verify that this aid was effectively used for hospital patients and the wounded, and was not diverted.

After the end of the bombing, the other MSF sections entered Kosovo behind the NATO troops. The Greek volunteers welcomed the members of these sections to Pristina and MSF-Greece asked to contribute towards their mission. But this request was not met. However, as an MSF presence was ensured by these sections, MSF-Greece judged that it was not longer useful to remain as such in this region. It did, however, develop activities in Nis and Novi Sad, and continued to send written reports to the other sections.

The exclusion procedure regarding MSF-Greece

The Belgian, French and Dutch sections considered that MSF-Greece had committed a serious misdemeanour. The President of the IO sent two people to Greece to "inquire" into these misdemeanours and present a report to the International Office meeting planned for 12 June.

MSF-Greece received these people with open arms and called an Extraordinary General Assembly (for 2 June) in order to hold an in-depth debate on this issue. The two emissaries refused to participate in this EGM and their enquiry thus almost took on the air of a police investigation. Their main concern was to prove that MSF-Greece requested visas without informing the other sections ...

All the documents in our possession were open to them and they were able to meet with everyone available. In return, we asked them to let us see their report before it was distributed so that we could contribute our own comments. They did not keep their promise and we were made aware of this report at the same time as the other IO section, barely three days before the meeting. Of course, this report concluded...
that MSF-Greece was "guilty" and proposed that the IO should call on our section to definitively end all our missions in order to have the "privilege" of remaining with the "MSF movement" as a "partner section" (i.e. a section without the right to carry out missions, but aiming to raise funds to finance Belgian, French and Dutch missions). If we did not agree to this, we would not be excluded, but our own act would lead to "self-exclusion"!

In fact, the exclusion of MSF-Greece had not been put on the agenda. However, it was announced to us orally by the President of the IO the evening before the meeting and confirmed at the beginning of the meeting that this issue would certainly be discussed. In fact, what took place was the exclusion of MSF-Greece, avoiding the normal procedure that would have led all the sections to deal with very basic questions. We denounced this procedure as contrary to the statutes and, above all, anti-democratic. We stated our refusal to participate in a discussion on our exclusion in which neither our statutory nor our real rights would be available to us in order to present our defence. On the other hand, we were willing to participate in any discussion on the basic issues. MSF-Greece rejected this suicidal suggestion and again proposed a dialogue. This proposal was not taken up. At the beginning of October we received a letter dated 27 September stating that the IO, in a new decision of 16 September had voted by 17 voices to 13 in favour of our "formal exclusion". We, of course, had not been asked to take part in this meeting, nor had we been informed that it was taking place. According to some information received, this meeting did not physically take place, but was limited to an exchange of e-mails. However, the information was confirmed in an article in Le Monde on 17 October, which explicitly mentioned "the exclusion of the Greek section". Following this, we in turn made this information known in Greece (it should be noted that we had made public our divergence from the attitude of the Western humanitarian organisations in the Kosovo conflict since the beginning of this internal crisis).

**The accusations and the facts**

The different accusations by the IO against MSF-Greece as they appeared in the decision voted on 12 June as well as in interviews with Jean-Marie Kindermans (Secretary of the IO), James Orbinksi (President of the IO) and Philippe Biberson (President of the French section) can be summarised as follows. We add a description of the facts to these accusations.

**Accusation 1**

*MSF-Greece lacked transparency.*

→ The facts
We informed our partners of our movements as they happened in a difficult and very changing situation and we passed on all the results of our exploratory mission practically at the same time as it was carried out.

**Accusation 2**

*MSF-Greece took a position in favour of the Serbs; MSF-Greece is pro-Serb.*

→ The facts
There is no text or other evidence on which to base such an accusation. From the start, MSF-Greece was one of the few Greek NGOs to clearly and publicly denounce
both the crimes of the Serbian army and para-military forces in Kosovo as a crime against humanity, as well as the central responsibility of Milosevic’s regime in the conflict (annex 1).

**Accusation 3**

MSF-Greece aided the Serbs more than the Albanians.

> The facts

MSF-Greek aid to the Serbs during the war in Kosovo amounted to 18 tons of medical material and the mobilisation of four volunteers. It should also be noted that this aid also benefited Albanians hospitalised in Pristina hospital (30% of the patients). Aid to Albanian refugees during the same period amounted to more than 30 tons and mobilised 15 volunteers. In addition, note that MSF-Greece mobilised in the past to aid Bosnian Moslems as well as Croats and Slovenians.

**Accusation 4**

MSF-Greece did not follow standard procedures in regard to MSF decision-making.

> The facts

The Directors of the main MSF sections decided that it was up to the Belgian section (or, failing that, to the French or Dutch sections) to enter Serbia (annex 4). It is important to note that this decision immediately set the limits of aid to the Serb population without taking into account the medical needs that an exploratory mission could demonstrate. This all took place as if the Directors’ main preoccupation was unrelated to the necessity of meeting the humanitarian needs (before the results were known, it was decided that aid “will not be on a large scale”), but rather to the necessity of meeting political imperatives (to reduce the “nationalism” of the Serb population).

In the end, as these sections did not wish to carry out the mission within a reasonable time (six weeks after the beginning of the war), and/or were unable to do so, we took the initiative to act, after informing them and asking them to participate with us. We did not follow the IO President’s injunction cancelling our mission because he could not guarantee to us that another MSF section would enter Serbia within a reasonable period. At that moment we decided to follow the dictates of our conscience as humanitarian volunteers faced with the misery of a population in danger.

**Accusation 5**

MSF-Greece’s exploratory mission compromised the possibility of other sections entering.

> The facts

It is difficult to understand how the entry of MSF-Greece compromised the entry of the other sections that neither entered before nor after our mission, nor after the end of the bombing. The Swiss section of MSF, which requested visas after the end of the bombing, was able to carry out an exploratory mission (it is regrettable that they did not ask for visas while the war was going on). The difficulty of access for the French and Belgian sections can, on the contrary, be linked with the following facts:

- the public position by Rony Brauman, signing himself Honorary President of MSF-France, calling for an intensification of the bombing, a land intervention, the arming of the KUL and the secession of Kosovo (annex 5);
the absence of any Belgian section programme aimed at helping the hundreds of thousands of Serb refugees chased out of the Krajina in 1995, although this section was present in Serbia until the beginning of the bombing. More generally speaking, it was difficult to imagine that Serbia would grant visas to organisations from countries with which it was at war and which in no way differentiated their position from that of their governments. Visa applications by MSF sections in neutral countries, such as Switzerland, Austria, Sweden or Greece, had much more chance of acceptance. But, apart from the Greek section, no section in these countries requested visas.

Accusation 6

**MSF-Greece sent medical aid without previously carrying out an evaluation mission.**

→ The facts

It is indeed customary to carry out an exploratory mission before beginning an aid programme in more or less chronic crisis situations (e.g. famine in Sudan, AIDS in Malawi, etc.). This rule is obviously not applicable in situations of extreme emergency where the needs are obvious. In these cases the first mission has a double role to bring first aid and to evaluate what should follow. The other MSF sections acted in this way in Gorazde (Bosnia) in 1993, in Kigali (Rwanda) in 1994 and in Kurdistan in 1996 to cite a few examples. And this is how MSF-Greece acted in sending 18 tons of medical material (after communicating with contacts on the ground) and in producing an evaluation report, which was immediately passed on to all the interested sections.

Accusation 7

**MSF-Greece was manipulated by the Serb regime.**

→ The facts

If the simple fact of bringing medical aid to a civilian population implies being manipulated, then it must certainly be admitted that MSF-Greece was manipulated by the Serb regime as much as by NATO, which controlled the other side, although the Belgian, French and Dutch sections were manipulated only by NATO.

Accusation 8

**MSF-Greece carried out a Greek government mission**

→ The facts

It was always clear, and the Greek government has clearly confirmed this, that its role was limited to that of mediation in order to open up a humanitarian corridor. This humanitarian corridor was made available to NGOs that were unable to act on their own behalf. MSF-Greece held no negotiations with the Greek government in regard to its mission, received no request or funding to carry out this mission and submitted no report to this government.

If, despite this, MSF-Greece should be regarded as having "collaborated" with the Greek government, what should be said about the other MSF sections that were in constant collaboration with NATO in Albania and in FRY Macedonia and entered Kosovo in the footsteps of NATO soldiers? Can it be forgotten that the official reason for the NATO intervention was precisely to open a "humanitarian corridor" into Kosovo and that the other MSF sections used this corridor unreservedly?
Accusation 9

MSF-Greece has posed problems for a long time and is in opposition to the other sections.

→ The facts

MSF is a large movement in which democratic debate often becomes very lively. The most frequent and violent outbursts generally oppose MSF-France and MSF-Belgium. MSF-Greece has always participated actively in this debating and its participation was always acknowledged as positive, until the Kosovo crisis. It should especially be noted that its founder and first president (Sotiris Papaspyropoulos) was a founding member of the International Office, was a head of mission in Iran for MSF-France for over a year and was co-opted to the Board of Directors of MSF-Switzerland in 1998. Its current president (Odysséas Boudouris) has carried out missions for MSF-France since 1989, and was elected to the Boards of MSF-France and MSF-Switzerland. In particular, he was unanimously elected vice-president of the International Office in 1998.

Behind the facts, the reasons for the conflict

First of all, note that the exclusion decided on by the IO (ultimate sanction) appears disproportionate in regard to the facts for which we are reproached (exploratory mission with 18 tons of material). "Misdemeanours" of this nature are a frequent grievance that various sections have blamed others for, but without the same consequences. If a section were to be excluded for an exploratory mission, practically all the sections would have had to be excluded several times!

In order to understand, the context must be recalled. The war in Kosovo was the first international war in Europe since the second world war. It showed up the deep splits between different societies on the continent. This split did not spare the humanitarian movement. Practically all the international organisations have suffered repercussions from this crisis. Most of them were able to handle their differences in a consensual manner. However, the International Office of MSF opted for authoritarian methods and exclusion instead of dialogue and reflection. Why?

There are two possible answers to this question. First of all, the management of some sections was probably more sensitive than that of others to the climate of polarisation, even fanaticism, that surfaced during the war among public opinion and/or the media. Secondly, the management of these same sections has for years been cultivating a tendency to concentrate decisional power in a restricted number of large centres. This observation comes not from us alone, but is also that of a large number of MSF members, including Philippe Biberson, the current president of MSF-France, who wrote in 1997, when he was president of the International Office: "At the international level, the participation of the different MSF (sections) has been taken away by the large sections in the name of a principle of coherence wrongly referred to as "operationality" and which is nothing other than a concentration of power."

In line with this tendency, a restricted number of large sections must decide about missions while the large number of other sections must limit themselves to fundraising in order to finance these missions. From this point of view, the Kosovo crisis appeared to be a good opportunity to "get rid of" MSF-Greece.
The future of MSF-Greece

MSF-Greece considers that its exclusion from the International Office is illegal and illegitimate. It has initiated procedures with the competent Belgian courts to have this decision annulled. But in any case, whether outside or inside the IO, MSF-Greece considers itself to be a member of the MSF movement, which cannot be summed up by (membership of) some “Office” or any other superstructure. The MSF movement is a common history to which we are definitively linked, real people who have experienced and built this history and, above all, the principles and ethics to which we all belong. MSF-Greece will therefore continue to look for dialogue with all the actors in the movement.

MSF-Greece is an association with several hundred volunteers supported by over 100,000 donors in Greece. The spontaneous and massive support of the whole of Greek society, in reaction to what it considers to be a scandalous sanction, constitutes a commanding mandate, not only to carry on, but also to intensify our actions from now on in defending the ideal of impartial humanitarian action. We warmly thank all those who have offered us their support in such a moving manner and assure them that we have understood their message.

We launch an appeal to all other sections and all their volunteers to end the anathema and excommunication procedures and to discuss together, without delay, the difficult challenges that the humanitarian movement is meeting today in the face of the diverse attempts by all governments, civilian and military, to take over (our role).