

Dangerous Liaisons: Bearing Witness and Political Propaganda

Biafra and Cambodia – the Founding Myths of Médecins Sans Frontières

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2006

Le *Centre de réflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires* (CRASH) a été créé par Médecins sans frontières en 1999. Sa vocation : stimuler la réflexion critique sur les pratiques de l'association afin d'en améliorer l'action.

Le Crash réalise des études et analyses portant sur l'action de MSF dans son environnement immédiat. Elaborées à partir des cadres et de l'expérience de l'association, ces textes ne représentent pas la « ligne du parti » MSF, pas plus qu'ils ne cherchent à défendre une conception du « vrai humanitaire ». Leur ambition est au contraire de contribuer au débat sur les enjeux, contraintes, limites – et par conséquent dilemmes – de l'action humanitaire. Les critiques, remarques et suggestions sont plus que bienvenues, elles sont attendues.

The *Centre de reflexion sur l'action et les savoirs humanitaires* (CRASH) was created by Médecins Sans Frontières in 1999. Its objective is to encourage debate and critical reflexion on the humanitarian practices of the association.

The Crash carries out in-depth studies and analyses of MSF's activities. This work is based on the framework and experience of the association. In no way, however, do these texts lay down the 'MSF party line', nor do they seek to defend the idea of 'true humanitarianism'. On the contrary, the objective is to contribute to debate on the challenges, constraints and limits –as well as the subsequent dilemmas- of humanitarian action. Any criticisms, remarks or suggestions are most welcome.

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All observers agree that in many respects, the Biafran War of 1967-70 was the founding event of the modern humanitarian aid movement. First, it was the scene of the first large-scale action by private aid groups and the Red Cross¹ in a post-colonial world. Second, these operations were conducted illegally and openly, involved months of intense activity, were supported by European public opinion and received widespread media attention. Last, this was the first time that some aid organizations and humanitarian aid actors publicly denounced the killings they witnessed. In France, this break with a tradition of silence is generally presented as the innovation that led to a new humanitarian movement, one that has since acted and spoken freely, refusing to compromise its principles as did the ICRC when it remained silent in the face of the Third Reich's death camps.

This link to the genocide of the Jews was, and remains, omnipresent in France, although the issue was raised only fleetingly in other countries. , When Médecins Sans Frontières received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1999, several of the organization's founders, who had worked in Biafra for the French Red Cross during the war, referred to it. In an opinion piece in the French newspaper, *Libération*, Patrick Aeberhard and Alain Deloche, MSF's cofounders and former presidents of Médecins du Monde, wrote, "Modern humanitarian aid was born in the summer of 1968 in the Biafran War... Faced with this horrific situation, [Red Cross doctors] decided to break the vow of silence they had taken when the ICRC hired them, rejecting the guilty neutrality of the doctors and representatives who visited Auschwitz during the Nazi genocide."² Although this practice of "secrecy" – alleged to have enabled the genocide of the Jews – has been debated for years,³ other leading French humanitarian aid figures and many journalists also adopted this widely-held belief. "We [the French doctors in Biafra] knew that after an October 14, 1942 decision of the executive committee [of the International Red Cross], during World War II [the organization's leaders] in Geneva had chosen not to reveal the existence of the extermination camps and to consider the Jews – intended victims of the final solution -- as prisoners no different from the others. We rejected that complicity. We refused to participate in the selection of the sick or to collude with the executioners. Much later, during a host of other crises, we saw that speaking out provided protection against murder and that the media were our allies."⁴

This new era of humanitarianism is perceived quite differently in Great Britain, Scandinavia and Switzerland, countries that supplied most of the aid during the first year of the Biafran conflict. In these countries, the dominant perception is that of a major conflict and famine relief operation in the Third World. In 1972, the Scandinavian church alliance, NordChurchAid, summarized its work and the context in restrained terms. "The Nigerian civil war (1967-1970) presented the world and, more specifically, the various governments and voluntary relief organizations, with a demand for

1 Between April 1968 and January 1970, the airlift organized by the consortium of religious organizations from Sao Tomé delivered 60,324 tons of aid to Biafra. It involved 5,314 flights, for an average of 8.4 flights carrying 95 tons per day. More than half of this aid was provided and transported by Scandinavian churches alone (source: *The NordChurchAid Airlift to Biafra 1968-1970: An Operations Report*, Hugh G. Lloyd, Mona L. Mollerup & Carl A. Bratved, Copenhagen, 1972). The international Red Cross, whose actions/movements were more restricted, delivered only 21,000 tons.

2 "Le nouvel horizon humanitaire," *Libération*, December 10, 1999.

3 Walter Laqueur, *The Terrible Secret: Suppression of the Truth About Hitler's 'Final Solution'*, 1981, Gallimard, Paris.

4 Bernard Kouchner, "Vive la vie," op-ed piece, *Le Monde*, December 11, 1999.

assistance unprecedented in scope and complexity. Aside from the political problems inherent to civil wars, the geographic factors of the war soon complicated matters, as the area under secessionist control was completely surrounded after mid-May, 1968."⁵

However, in spring 1968, when the famine began, humanitarian actors and journalists also compared the Biafran situation to the killing of the Jews. (Some did not; specifically, the ICRC, which was bound by its Convention's requirements of confidentiality.) For them, though, unlike for the French, the only reason to evoke genocide seemed to be to emphasize the extreme seriousness of the situation. They stopped referring to genocide after 1968 and they didn't seem to link it to protection of the victims, as the French humanitarian aid workers believed such a denunciation could offer.

Contrary to the Vietnam War, which was underway at the same time, but was presented as reflecting the major political cleavage of the time, the Biafran war was described in juridical -moral terms, far from the mass anti-imperialist mobilizations. However, it did arouse vigorous public controversy in which the humanitarian movement's narrative of the event – that is, a co-production by aid actors based on stereotypes of executioner, victim and narrator-aid worker – played a leading role.

Biafra

In July 1967, a war of independence broke out in Nigeria. During 1964-65, regional and social tension and ethnic violence directed primarily against the Igbo people, originally from the country's Southeastern province of Biafra (with 14 million people), had set the stage for an attempted bloody coup d'état, led by Igbo officers in January 1966, which failed. The Igbos, most of them Christian, were massacred. Thousands subsequently returned to Biafra.

That same year, the new French oil company, Elf, announced the discovery of rich oilfields in Biafra's Port Harcourt region. The prospect of oil revenues fanned the conflict. The military governor, Colonel Ojukwu, the secessionists' future leader, announced that the money would remain in Biafra to compensate those who had returned. Under his leadership, Biafra declared independence on May 26, 1967, unleashing a two and a half year war that ended in January 1970. In the early months, secessionist forces managed to resist the federal army's offensives and established Biafran authority over a large part of the land they claimed. As soon as the conflict began, the ICRC organized a humanitarian aid effort in which Catholic and reformed churches played a leading role. Irish missionaries had been working to win converts in Igboland since the end of British military conquest in 1905. Starting in January 1968, Biafran authorities printed their own money, stamps and passports and produced other tangible attributes of sovereignty. At the same time, the authorities experienced serious military reversals. Losses of land led to initial population displacements, some on Biafran territory and others on the land that government forces had won back. The ICRC and Biafran support groups provided food and medicines from the Spanish island, Santa Isabel, off the coast of Equatorial Guinea, an area that had been declared "neutral" in accordance with Red Cross criteria.

In response to food shortages that began appearing in March and problems in delivering aid, Irish priests, supported by the Catholic Church, decided to deliver aid via military resupply planes flying from Lisbon. Caritas International entered into an agreement with the primary weapons supplier for the secessionists, which operated from the Portuguese capital. Unlike the ICRC, which had promised the head of the Nigerian government that it would not combine deliveries of humanitarian aid and weapons, the Church did not consider itself to be under any such restriction. Concerned

5 The NordChurchAid Airlift to Biafra 1968-1970, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

about protecting its Nigerian members, the World Council of Churches remained aligned with the ICRC, which it supplied with food and supplies, for a longer period. Several weeks later, Caritas leveled serious accusations against the federal government and issued open criticism of the ICRC. "The Red Cross has allowed itself to be hobbled by a legalistic approach in order to avoid any criticism. We [Caritas] will not be trapped in that way."⁶

In May 1968, when Port Harcourt fell, defeat seemed to be imminent. At that point, independence forces controlled only an enclave of a few thousand square kilometers, where several million uprooted people, soon to be decimated by famine, had gathered. As in nearly all wartime situations, famine's first victims are displaced persons. For the most part, it spares those who manage to remain in their usual place of residence.

Although General Gowon, Nigeria's head of state, had allowed humanitarian organizations to supply the territory held by the insurgents, he instituted a partial blockade to strengthen his hand in the negotiations then underway in Uganda, sponsored by the Organization of African Unity. This was not done with the aim of asphyxiating the insurgent region entirely, since he agreed to preserve access via federal territory as evidence of sovereignty over the entire country. Although the food situation was worsening quickly, Colonel Ojukwu refused any aid via that route for the same reason. When the famine turned into a disaster, Christian organizations resumed their flights (clandestinely, this time) from the Portuguese island of *São Tomé*. Abandoning its legalistic posture, the ICRC decided to follow their lead.

Press coverage of the war had been sporadic up to that point. Then a dramatic change happened in the tone and frequency of eyewitness accounts and articles, largely due to an outside influence. In a very remarkable move for the time, Biafran leaders hired public relations agency, Markpress, in January 1968. According to Paddy Davies,⁷ a member of the Biafran Propaganda Secretariat, the job of the Geneva-based Markpress Biafran Overseas Press Division was to weaken the external enemy and maintain internal motivation. The French government paid its fees. Describing its role 30 years later, Davies explained that the three successive phases of the communication strategy were the *jihād*, the genocide and the famine, emphasizing that "this was the first time in the history of war that famine was used as a propaganda weapon" (that is, turned against those who had made it a weapon of war). The famine was thus the secessionists' most valuable asset, without conflicting with the issues of *jihād* and genocide which could have been, respectively, the primary cause and the result sought.

The agency organized field trips for reporters and issued an average of two press releases daily throughout the war. The June 21, 1968 release launched the communications phase on the famine as a strategy of annihilation. "For many [of the refugees], a terrible 'final solution' – death by hunger – is approaching." At that point, reports began to surface in Great Britain that 3,000 children were dying of hunger daily. The press picked up the figure and the words "genocide" and "extermination"⁸ began to be used. Until that time, says writer Thierry Hentsch,⁹ Biafra had sought

6 Father Byrne, Caritas representative in Sao Tome, in *Le Monde*, August 19, 1968.

7 Interview with Paddy Davies on *Conversations à propos de la guerre du Biafra*, a documentary series produced by Joël Calmettes and broadcast on the French History Channel from December 27, 2003 – January 2, 2004 (7 25-minute programs)."

8 Maggie Black, *A Cause for our Times: Oxfam the First 50 Years*, Oxfam, Oxford University Press, 1992, p.121.

9 Thierry Hentsch, *Face au blocus. La Croix-Rouge internationale dans le Biafra en guerre (1967-1970)*, Institut des hautes études internationales, Geneva, 1973, p. 94. On page 95, Hentsch notes that "in The Times Index for July/August 1968, the 'Refugees and Famine Relief' is the longest sub-heading under the "Nigeria" heading (more than one-half page), while it constituted only 10 lines in the May/June index."

to portray itself as a society successfully resisting the total war launched against it. As military defeat now appeared certain, the famine was to be used as the "new symbol of genocide."

The leading British organizations¹⁰ – in particular, Oxfam, which played a leading role – had accepted the ICRC's authority and were waiting for Red Cross aid channels to be set up so that they could deliver their aid. In response to public pressure, they decided to take the Portuguese route.

"Popular opinion – fired up by the Biafran propaganda campaign – blamed the starvation in the enclave on the Federal Army and its British backing. It was hard to believe that the Biafran leader himself could be obstructing the mass import of relief foods: as *The Guardian* pointed out, it was his people who were starving. Accordingly, Kirkley [Oxfam's secretary general], in a blaze of publicity, went to Lisbon to fly into Biafra on a Wharton arms run to persuade Ojukwu to let in relief. Somehow Oxfam believed that a voluntary agency, representing nothing but a compassionate section of British opinion, might succeed where the massed ranks of governments, the OAU, the Pope, and the Red Cross establishment had so far failed".

A little later, in July, images of the famine reached France, arousing the same emotions. The French newspaper, *Le Monde*, began publishing regular reports on the war in Nigeria. Fundraising drives were organized and the French Red Cross raised 13 million francs, while the French government issued a press release expressing its support for Biafran independence. "The blood spilled and the suffering the Biafran people have endured for more than a year demonstrate their desire to affirm their existence as a people ... The conflict must be resolved based on the people's right to self-determination."¹¹

On July 30, 1968, the day before this press release was issued, the French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, published a front-page story by Jean-François Chauvel that included accusations made by a priest in Biafra. "Why all this bureaucracy? On the basis of what law and what transcendent authority does the International Committee [of the Red Cross] refuse to deliver food to Biafra without obtaining Lagos' agreement? Why did it make this political choice? How can we even think about politics when thousands of children are dying?" While the ICRC awaited approval from the Nigerian government before taking action in Biafra, JointChurchAid, a logistical organization created by a coalition of Christian churches, was working in *São Tomé* under the terms imposed by the secessionist authorities.

With the agreement of the Ivory Coast and Gabon governments, in the fall of 1968, the French government mobilized the Red Cross¹² (whose base was established in Libreville, Gabon) and, simultaneously, set up a clandestine military aid operation. Led by Hank Wharton, a mercenary and arms dealer (with whom Caritas had entered into an agreement several months earlier, French, Rhodesian, South African and Portuguese pilots transported weapons from Portugal to the Biafran enclave via *São Tomé*, where they boarded humanitarian aid teams and loaded medicines and food. Biafran authorities urged all parties, including the ICRC, to carry out night flights and transport both relief supplies and weapons. Were humanitarian aid organizations aware of the

¹⁰ In addition to Oxfam and the Red Cross, they included Christian Aid, Save the Children and War on Want, gathered under the auspices of the Disasters Emergency Committee (DEC), which was created in response to the 1963 Skopje earthquake and intended to issue joint appeals in the press (primarily the BBC), share contributions and coordinate British aid. The DEC still exists, made up of the same organizations.

¹² Press release issued by the Conseil des ministres (Council of Ministers) on July 31, 1968, in Daniel Bach, "Le général de Gaulle et la guerre civile au Nigéria." *Revue canadienne des études africaines*, Volume 14, n°2, 1980 : 259-272

¹¹ July 31, 1968 Conseil des ministres press release in Daniel Bach, "Le général de Gaulle et la guerre civile au Nigéria," *Revue canadienne des études africaines*, Volume 14, n°2, 1980 : 259-272

¹² Ibid.

political consequences of submitting the conduct of their operations to Biafran leaders' orders? Whether it was the case or not, according to Thierry Hentsch, "[the ICRC], forced by circumstances to comply with the Biafrans' conditions rather than the federal government's requirements, involuntarily sided with the secessionist government's hard-liners, thus helping to consolidate the position of the 'hawks' in the Biafran system."¹³

Just when the federal offensive appeared unstoppable, this military and food aid enabled the secessionists to break through the Nigerian front and retake the initiative. In addition to direct assistance, France organized diplomatic support among African nations.

Approximately 100 Irish and dozens of Protestant missionaries were also working in Biafra. Their presence, which was used to mobilize Christians, explains the massive commitment on the part of Caritas International and the World Council of Churches, the entities representing, respectively, Catholic and Protestant churches. As part of JointChurchAid, they gradually organized an airlift that dispatched up to 450 flights per month. All these activities took place at night at risk of attack by Nigerian anti-aircraft defence.

The Irish priests were among the fiercest supporters of the Biafran cause. Their denunciation of the federal government's crimes replayed two key conflicts: "the cross *versus* the crescent" and Ireland *versus* the British colonizer. The organization they created, Irish Concern, referred to the devastating Irish famine of 1846-47.¹⁴ That event was a direct consequence of British colonial domination of Ireland and resulted in more than 1 million deaths. Today's Biafrans were yesterday's Irish and the former became the tool for seeking revenge against a common enemy – the British.

Markpress, the public relations agency paid by French intelligence services, introduced the theme of genocide. Journalists in the field were directed and supervised by the Overseas Press Service, which arranged for them to see the Biafrans' self-organization, the fighters' resistance and, above all, civilian agony. To save journalists' time, the authorities created a "park" of starving people, where hundreds dying of hunger were gathered to await the cameras. The period was marked by major Nazi trials which had been held recently (Eichmann's in 1961 and the Frankfurt Auschwitz trial in 1965) and the media created a parallel between the extermination of the Jews and the fate of the Igbo people¹⁵ – the "Jews" of Africa – even comparing the Biafran enclave to the Warsaw ghetto.

The Nigerian government did not desert the battlefield of public relations. It organized international visits to combat zones and recaptured territory, where millions of Igbo people lived, and emphasized its position. It was able to show that the Igbos living under its jurisdiction were treated like other Nigerians and convinced French MP's that the government did not have genocidal intentions. During late 1968-early 1969, a chorus of op-ed pieces appeared in the press in reaction to a debate launched by French member of Parliament Aymar Achille-Fould. He led a delegation that supported the Nigerian government's position and rejected the notion that genocide was occurring. In February, 30 doctors, journalists and pilots who had worked in Biafra published an open letter that spoke of "genocide underway" and "death camps." The letter accused various French and international delegations of failing to go into the field. "If you had been assigned to investigate whether the Nazis were carrying out genocide against the Jews, would you have gone

13 Thierry Hentsch, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

14 The writer's conversations with Father Angus Finucane, founder of Irish Concern, whom the former met when both were working during the famines in Uganda (1980) and Ethiopia (1985).

15 Several recent Igbo cultural events have taken as their theme the notion of the Jewish origins of the Igbo people, the 13th tribe of Israel. See: <http://www.igbo-organization-newyork.org/>.

to ski resorts in Bavaria or to concentration camps?"¹⁶ Several of MSF's future founders signed the letter. Images of emaciated children, evoking those seen when the Nazi camps were opened, authenticated the denunciations. The Gaullists also joined the public debate. They launched an appeal calling for recognition of "Biafra's right to independence," with support from many former government ministers who also denounced what they referred to as genocide.

In January 1970, after two and a half years of war, the Nigerian army regained control of the province. As soon as the surrender was announced, the Nigerian government ordered a general amnesty and took responsibility for ensuring the protection of Biafran lives and property. Two years later, some of the doctors who had worked for the French Red Cross founded Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). The Biafran leaders' and Christian organizations' communications strategy was completely overshadowed by the denunciation of the "genocide in Biafra", a touchstone – in terms of speaking out – for MSF and other groups formed from the same mobilization at the turn of the 1970s-1980s.

Cambodia

Another controversy erupted several years later, in 1979. This one involved questions regarding the reality of and the stakes at play in a famine in Cambodia. MSF had just experienced a split and most of the founders had left the organization. However, their successors agreed with them regarding the critical role of "speaking out and bearing witness;" that is, on the importance of attracting media attention as part of MSF's work. This view separated the modern humanitarian movement, which supported speaking freely and openly, from traditional charitable organizations and their complicit, passive silence. For the new leadership team, the opportunity to denounce those responsible for the famine in Cambodia would show continuity with MSF's founders on that point. If the "Comité contre le génocide au Biafra" (the "anti-genocide" effort) helped bring MSF into being, the "Marche pour la survie du Cambodge" (a march organized to bring medical supplies and food to Cambodians) helped to renew it. Both were based on a combination of beliefs, errors and propagandistic manipulation.

In January 1979, at the end of a swift offensive that forced the Khmer Rouge from power, the Vietnamese Army established a pro-Hanoi government in Phnom Penh. "Democratic Kampuchea" was overthrown without opposition, but Khmer Rouge troops soon reorganized and mounted resistance to the Vietnamese Army, which was moving towards western and northern Cambodia. Sympathy for the Khmer Rouge among certain "Third World solidarity" groups dissolved as news of atrocities carried out by the Angkar (the Khmer Rouge hierarchy) emerged from the refugee camps. The Vietnamese invaders were thus seen as liberators, both in Cambodia and around the world (with the notable exception of the ASEAN nations, which interpreted the events as a threatening expansion of Hanoi's sphere of influence).¹⁷

At that time I was in Thailand, working as an MSF volunteer in a refugee camp that had been established in 1976 to house Cambodians fleeing the Pol Pot regime. I immediately saw the refugees' relief when they learned that the Khmer Rouge had been removed from power. However, over the course of that year, I also noted mounting anxiety as news arrived from Cambodia via networks of family members and friends. People spoke of violence and looting by

¹⁶ "Une trentaine de médecins, pilotes et journalistes dénoncent 'le génocide au Biafra,'" *Le Monde*, February 11, 1969. Most French newspapers published long excerpts from this open letter.

¹⁷ At that time, ASEAN was made up of the following countries: Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and Brunei. See: Nayan Chanda, 1986 *Les Frères ennemis, la péninsule indochinoise après Saïgon*, Paris, Presses du CNRS, 1987, p. 308 sq.

the Vietnamese Army and predicted the arrival of new refugees. Partial information only added to the confusion and anguish.

In April, Western supporters of the Hanoi regime were invited to visit the capital briefly. Journalist Nayan Chanda reported their comments in the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, the region's leading weekly publication. "Visitors describe Kampuchea as a country emerging from a holocaust. Abandoned towns across this burned land are strewn with skeletons and the debris of war. Hundreds of thousands of exhausted, stunned people are crisscrossing the country in search of family members or in an effort to return to their village."¹⁸ Rumors of severe food shortages began to circulate at that time. The Vietnamese government's immediate denials failed to convince foreign observers in the region. In May, more Communist visitors from abroad (including Australian journalist, Wilfred Burchett, and two French doctors) brought back reports of Khmer Rouge ravages and images of Tuol Sleng, the Phnom Penh high school transformed into a torture center, where more than 14,000 people had been killed after "admitting" their crimes.

In July, the United Nations received Cambodia's first request for food aid. Signed by Foreign Affairs Minister Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge officer, it reported the deaths of three million people during the Pol Pot regime and stated that famine threatened half of the four million survivors. This letter marked the start of "hunger diplomacy," as the country gradually opened to international aid organizations.

Over the course of the summer, several delegations (from UNICEF, the ICRC, Oxfam, the CCFD, MSF and other organizations) made short, closely-monitored visits to Cambodia. All delivered the same report: infrastructure destroyed, hospitals and orphanages abandoned and patients and children without families in an appalling state of health. Although no specific observations confirmed Hun Sen's appeal, the many accounts from Cambodia regarding the Khmer Rouge destruction supported it. The cumulative violence – from massive population displacement to forced collectivization and destruction of agricultural infrastructure – pointed to a severe food shortage that international aid, still inadequate, could not remedy. The likelihood of catastrophic food shortages was increased by fighting between Vietnamese troops and routed Khmer Rouge soldiers in eastern and northern Cambodia. When the MSF mission ended, Claude Malhuret, then MSF's secretary general, said, "The Cambodian population is in danger of death. If we do not act in time, over the coming weeks and months we will witness the physical elimination of what remains of a population already decimated by the Khmer Rouge."¹⁹

However, against the backdrop of the Cold War, the debate over local realities in Cambodia was colored by foreign concerns. By that time, everyone acknowledged that the Khmer Rouge had been a disaster, but the nature of the new government continued to divide commentators and observers along the dominant political dividing lines of the period. Some, led by the British NGO Oxfam, wanted to recognize the new government as Cambodia's legal representative so that emergency aid could be released and delivered via Phnom Penh and increased to the necessary level. Only the Soviet Union's allies recognized the government, which had been put in place by the Vietnamese. The Khmer Rouge still represented Cambodia in international bodies. This situation was described, reasonably so, as a factor blocking aid, and, under the circumstances, was catastrophic in human terms. Others – in particular MSF – believed the Cambodian government was incapable of preventing its Vietnamese protectors from looting the country and thus only worsened the situation. Statements from refugees in the areas where MSF teams were working supported this view.

18 Quoted by William Shawcross, *Le Poids de la Pitié*, Paris, Balland, 1985, p. 92.

19 *Le Figaro*, July 20, 1979.

The fear of famine increased with the arrival of Cambodian refugees fleeing the war. In October 1979, after months wandering under the iron rule of Khmer Rouge soldiers pursued by Vietnamese troops and after a long period during which the Thai Army blocked them, 30,000 Cambodians managed to cross into Thailand. Their condition was desperate. Thousands died in the days following their arrival. The scenes of death and desolation filmed in the "no man's land" they had entered featured in evening news reports around the world, evoking images of the liberation of the Nazi camps. As Shawcross reported, "... [I]n the fall of 1979, when Cambodia became the subject of fierce debate in the West, it was compared to the Holocaust practically every day."²⁰

As in Biafra, the use of "Nazism" as a rhetorical device served two simultaneous purposes: establishing the accusers' moral position while charging the accused with infamy, as well as expressing the seriousness of the event in order to call for action. For example, the Tuol Sleng prison, converted into a museum, was presented as the "Asian Auschwitz" and its curator was subsequently sent to East Germany to visit the remains of the Nazi camps and draw inspiration for Cambodia's own "never forget." "Unanimous condemnation of the Vietnamese intervention and the sanctions that followed meant that winning legitimacy for the new regime became an absolute priority for Vietnamese foreign policy," Nayan Chanda wrote. "With that in mind, Hanoi chose to launch moral and legal accusations against Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea, rather than focus on the virtues of the government it had put in place."²¹

The famine became a valuable political and material resource for a fragile regime, while also serving as a tool for mobilizing humanitarian aid campaigns. Despite unanimous agreement that famine existed, observers and actors disagreed on how to interpret its causes and, thus, on the practical actions to take. For Oxfam, "The chief obstacle to the relief of suffering was foot-dragging on the part of the Western-backed international establishment and its antipathy towards the Vietnam-installed Phom Penh regime"²² With support from NGOs, UNICEF and some of the press, the Cambodian government launched urgent appeals to the international community to increase aid and deliver it through official channels via Phnom Penh.

Other NGOs – particularly MSF – called for direct aid under international control because they believed that the urgent need required bypassing standard channels and deploying a food distribution system at locations where people were suffering from famine. I was at the Cambodian border when the refugees crossed in October 1979. Seeing the thousands of dying people convinced me that a life-and-death emergency was underway in Cambodia. MSF brought in a host of medical teams to camps on the Thai border, thus improvising its first large-scale aid operation. The number of refugees rose from 30,000 to 300,000 in three months and Thailand became a sanctuary for the military resistance, Khmer Rouge fighters and nationalists all fleeing the Vietnamese occupation.

Refugees from Cambodia and the few foreigners allowed into the country provided corroborating information about the tight restrictions placed on foreigners, the authorities' grip on aid and the misappropriation of aid by the Vietnamese Army. The new regime's supporters claimed that these obstacles resulted solely from the state of war, the continued Khmer Rouge threat and the inexperience of a new administration in a ruined country. Opponents, however, were convinced that the authorities sought to create barriers in order to tighten its grip over the population.

20 William Shawcross, *op. cit.*, p. 380.

21 Nayan Chanda, *op. cit.*, p. 309.

22 Maggie Black, *op. cit.*, p. 221.

With the goal of symbolically dismantling the obstacles created by authorities in Phnom Penh, MSF decided to organize a 'March for the Survival of Cambodia' in December at the border and published an appeal in the major French daily newspapers. "We must enter Cambodia and convince the Vietnamese occupiers that they must not allow those who escaped the Khmer Rouge genocide to die. That is why we are organizing the 'March for the Survival of Cambodia' ... The barriers preventing us from coming to the aid of human beings at risk of death must be dismantled ... so that the Cambodian people can survive."²³

In truth, the refugees' condition was hardly representative of the entire Cambodian population. Their physical state was appalling because they had served as slave labor for Khmer Rouge troops during the many months of pursuit by the Vietnamese Army. They had survived in the forest by eating roots and small animals. Despite Cambodia's disastrous situation, most of the population outside the conflict zones had turned to a subsistence economy, made possible by fertile and well-watered lands. Daily life was frugal and deprivation was widespread, but people managed to find enough to eat.

However, we had good reason to believe that a famine existed. The catastrophic series of wars and tyrannical regimes that characterized the 1970s, as well as the physical distress of the refugees who arrived at the border in October, made the catastrophe seem highly plausible. The reigning Cold War thinking made the existence of famine both likely in practical terms and useful in political ones. For the "anti-totalitarian" camp, to which MSF belonged, it illustrated the failure of the Communist utopia, leading the regime to turn against the weakest.

The March for Survival closed Cambodia's doors permanently to MSF and the organization was never able to directly confirm its assertions. Years later, when the group's leaders read William Shawcross' book, *The Quality of Mercy: Cambodia, Holocaust and Modern Conscience*, published in France in 1985, they realized that there had been no basis for that action, which had been very controversial within the organization. It confirmed what Oxfam the first major NGO to be admitted to Cambodia, knew since the very beginning. By the fall of 1979, its nutrition expert had informed the organization's leaders that people were not dying of hunger, but a major fundraising drive had already begun. The group, though, decided that they could not retract the alarmist statements and accounts on which the campaign was based.²⁴

The controversy over the stakes of the Biafran war ended with the secessionists' defeat, but in the minds of the French organizations involved, the conflict remains a critical break with the past and marks the rebirth of modern humanitarianism. Its new foundations were based on the notions of the humanitarian aid actor as witness for the prosecution, denunciation as a moral obligation and the mobilization of public opinion as a last resort in the face of mass crimes. MSF's campaign against the supposed famine in Cambodia was, to a large extent, overdetermined by the desire of its new leaders to reclaim that conception and make "bearing witness" an essential element of humanitarian action in the field.²⁵

23 *Le Figaro, Le Matin de Paris, Libération, Le Monde* of December 20 and 21, 1979.

24 Cf. Maggie Black, *op. cit.*, p. 227. The Vietnamese Army withdrew from Cambodia in 1989 as the end of the Cold War favored a political resolution, which took shape with the Paris Peace Agreement (UNTAC) of 1991 and the establishment of a provisional U.N. authority responsible for demilitarizing the factions, organizing the return of refugees and organizing free elections that were held in May 1993. In 1999, Cambodia became an ASEAN member. The Hun Sen regime still rules the country.

25 The original MSF Charter prohibited "any interference" in the internal affairs of countries where the organization works.

The rapprochement of these two events is based on the closeness of the humanitarian actors who were involved, but also on their common reference to Nazi and Communist totalitarianisms as manifestations of the evil they were fighting. During the 1980s, a time of rapid growth and development within the humanitarian movement, the concept of "duty to remember" gained momentum in the public space. This new "*conscience de la Shoah*"²⁶ (conscience of the Holocaust) was reinterpreted as a critique of national sovereignty in the name of protecting victims. French humanitarian aid actors used it increasingly in their statements throughout the 1980s and 1990s, as shown by public acceptance of the notion of "humanitarian intervention" and by the many references to Auschwitz and to the secret of the "final solution" in the public statements of French NGOs.²⁷ This "rhetoric of remembrance," which divided the world into executioners, heroes and victims, provided a narrative for the humanitarian movement's commitment to bearing witness, in which the accuser occupied the enviable position of resistance, both savior and dispenser of justice.

Turning Point

The 1984-85 famine in Ethiopia marked a turning point in the conception of "speaking out and bearing witness" within MSF. Beginning in early 1985, all humanitarian aid actors were faced with the policy of "resettlement" (forced transfer of populations in southern Ethiopia) and "villagization" (destruction of villages and the grouping of populations into new, neighboring sites under the control of the Party). International humanitarian organizations unwittingly played a very specific role in the "resettlement" system.²⁸

By winning the trust of the population in affected regions, NGOs helped attract people to the relief camps, where the Party militia conducted raids to supply its quotas of "volunteers" for "resettlement." Some of the aid groups' trucks, intended for aid deliveries, were also used to transport thousands of people who were displaced by force. Faced with questions and criticism in the press, the Ethiopian government pointed to NGO support for its "land reform," which it could reasonably claim, given the groups' lack of objections. This accelerated collectivization policy led to the death of more than 100,000 people in transit camps and resettlement areas.²⁹

Confrontation with Communist regimes dominated in most of the contexts – civil wars and refugee camps -- in which MSF worked during those years. For MSF's leaders (I was the organization's President at that time), the defense of human rights and humanitarian principles meant defending democracy and criticizing totalitarianism.³⁰ We were particularly distrustful of governments claiming to incarnate the "liberation of the people." Under conditions where aid was used as a tool in a "dekulakization" strategy³¹, humanitarian aid actors served as "useful idiots." Despite themselves, they were complicit in the Ethiopian government's abuses, which they were no longer able to denounce as an external third party.

26 Philippe Mesnard, *Consciences de la Shoah, critique des représentations et des discours*, Editions Kimé, Paris, 2000.

27 Cf. Philippe Mesnard, *La victime écran, La représentation humanitaire en question*, Editions Textuel, Paris, 2002.

28 Cf. François Jean, *Du bon usage de la famine*, document published by MSF in 1986.

29 Jason W. Clay and Bonnie K. Holcomb, *Politics and the Ethiopian Famine 1984-1985*, Cambridge (USA), 1986. An initial version ("Occasional Paper") of this document was sent to NGOs working in Ethiopia in summer 1985.

30 In 1985, the Fondation Liberté sans frontières (the Freedom Without Borders foundation), created by MSF, organized a conference titled "*Le tiersmondisme en question*" (questioning support for Third-World movements) during which Third-World regimes described as "progressive" and the support they received from international aid entities was strongly criticized. Cf Rony Brauman (dir.), *Le tiersmondisme en question*, Ed. Olivier Orban, Paris, 1986

31 The term was used by the regime's leaders.

As field NGO's, our responsibility was raised directly in the commission of crimes against humanity. MSF organized a campaign on that issue, arousing considerable controversy that created conflict with the government in Addis Ababa and many NGOs working in Ethiopia. MSF was expelled from the country in December 1985. The organization's position was based primarily on a critical analysis of our role and responsibilities as aid actors in a given context, rather than on a desire to denounce crimes we had not necessarily witnessed firsthand.

MSF's voluntary departure from the Rwandan camps in Zaire and Tanzania in November 1994, the challenge to humanitarian institutions involved in the pursuit of Rwandan refugees during the 1997-1998 war in Zaire and the 1998 withdrawal from North Korea were all critical moments for MSF in terms of taking public positions. These actions were not motivated exclusively by a desire to protest mass violence. The common rationale was the conviction that, under those circumstances, humanitarian aid served a criminal authority and that once there were no more opportunities to correct the situation, withdrawal was preferable to action.

The notion that the denunciation of human rights violations in countries where the organization had a presence constituted an "integral part of MSF's mission"³² lost its hold when the stakes associated with the Cold War dissolved. The organization's members have witnessed killings of civilians on various occasions, from Kigali and Butare (Rwanda, during the 1994 genocide), to Srebrenica (Bosnia) and Kibeho (Rwanda) in 1995. As eyewitnesses, they have spoken publicly in the press, before parliamentary commissions and to the International Criminal Court (in the case of Rwanda) about what they saw. However, apart from these specific circumstances, denunciation is no longer the focus of speaking out. It is no longer a goal because MSF no longer considers itself a "sentinel of human rights."³³ The stakes involved in speaking out have changed; associated now with other practices and adapted to a different framework of discourse, they are far removed from the notion of "bearing witness" as conceived during the Biafran and Cambodian conflicts.

32 The phrase used widely in many documents.

33 A phrase used readily in the 1980s, specifically in 1988, when the Council of Europe awarded its Human Rights Prize to MSF.