

INTRODUCTION

In 1983, a famine began in Ethiopia's northern provinces that would affect millions of people. It resulted from the combined effects of a two-year long drought throughout the Sahel, the Eritrean war, and the forced agricultural collectivisation policy pursued for years by the pro-Soviet regime in Ethiopia led by Colonel Mengistu.

Tens of thousands of farmers fled with their families to food distribution centres set up by the authorities. Yet, the government waited until after the September 1984 celebration of the revolution's anniversary to officially acknowledge the famine's existence. The spirit of solidarity aroused by media coverage of the catastrophe made it possible to raise an unprecedented amount of international aid from institutional donors and individuals in the West.

However, the Ethiopian regime diverted a portion of that aid, to carry out forced population transfers from rebel areas of the arid, high altitude, northern plateaus to the more fertile and plains in the south of the country where the population could be more easily controlled. The famine prompted the rural population to head to distribution centres, where they were loaded onto trucks, often requisitioned from aid organisations, and transported like livestock. This further hampered delivery of aid to the south. Conditions en route were appalling and no preparations were made to resettle the families when they arrived in the malaria-infested regions. At least 100,000 people were estimated to have died in 1985 during resettlement operations.

From April 1984, MSF France teams opened medical programmes in the northern Wollo region, near the Korem distribution centre. Programmes in Kobo (September 1984), Kelala and Sekota (June 1985) followed. The authorities pressed for transfers to the south, regularly impeding the teams' work. On several occasions, the teams were forbidden to treat certain individuals or to distribute blankets. MSF teams also witnessed round-ups carried out by the Ethiopian army among the camp populations. Periods of accelerated population transfers alternated with periods when transfers were suspended.

On several occasions, the authorities refused to authorise MSF's request to open a therapeutic feeding centre in Kelala, which could have prevented the deaths of several thousands of children. In October 1985, MSF France publicly denounced the government's refu-

sal to open a therapeutic feeding centre, along with its misuse of international aid for forced population transfers, and the shocking conditions under which transfers were being carried out. In the days that followed, the Ethiopian government expelled MSF France from the country.

The majority of the other aid organisations working in Ethiopia, some of which agreed with MSF's analysis, did not take a public position on the forced resettlements. Others criticised MSF's position, which they described as 'political'. Bob Geldof, founder and spokesperson for Band Aid and the organiser of the 'concert of the century' for Ethiopia, agreed with them. In 1986, following its expulsion, MSF France conducted a campaign in Europe and the United States to explain its actions, which received considerable media coverage. The Ethiopian authorities suspended the transfer operations temporarily.

MSF Belgium's teams had been working in Idaga Hamus in the Tigre since March 1985 and in Zambalesa since the summer of 1985. Team members did not witness forced transfers, and thus did not take a public position. They continued to develop their programmes with the agreement of Ethiopian authorities. Similarly, MSF Holland, created in September 1984, which was working with Ethiopian refugees in Somalia, did not take a public position either.

During the same period, the Belgian and French sections broke off relations over a disagreement regarding Liberté Sans Frontières (LSF), a think tank created by MSF France. MSF Belgium attributed political motives to LSF, linked to MSF France's analysis of the Ethiopian situation.

These events occurred within the context of an unprecedented humanitarian mobilisation and media attention and confronted MSF with a series of new dilemmas:

- What should be done if it appears that aid is being used against the populations for whom it is intended?
- Could MSF's denunciation endanger international aid operations in Ethiopia?
- By taking such positions, could MSF put its own existence and, thus, its other activities at risk?