

INTRODUCTION

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 volunteers 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, that was 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 volunteers soon clashed with the committees because they refused to meet the committees' 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 volunteers also witnessed violent demonstrations against refugees who wanted to return to El Salvador and other abuses against refugees,

sometimes to the point of sacrifice, 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 in succession:

- 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 guerrilla forces in the camps?
- Inversely, would remaining silent about the reasons for MSF's withdrawal not negate the sense and impact of such a decision?