# NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

**Since 1984, the leadership of MSF France had shown interest in being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. According to Rony Brauman, its president at the time, this award would bring the association "an international status" and bestow protection on the teams in conflict situations.**

**Minutes** from MSF France Collegial Management Committee meeting, 19 February 1984 (in French)

**Extract:**
Rony Brauman [MSF France President] informs the board that MSF is officially in the running for the 1984 Nobel Peace Prize. The award's importance seems obvious to everyone, both in terms of what it would mean for our organisation's international status as well as the protection it would provide our teams working in conflict situations.

**In 1991, being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize became a shared goal for the MSF movement – then still under construction. The International council, then chaired by the President of MSF France, tasked the French section with designing a strategy and setting up a dossier for an MSF candidacy.**

**According to the rules of the Norwegian Committee, responsible for selecting the eligible candidates – and then the Nobel Peace Prize laureate – MSF had to be nominated by a qualified nominator[1].**

**Therefore, a campaign of communication towards possible nominators was launched. It highlighted the forgotten conflicts in which MSF was conducting operations at the time (Somalia, Kurdistan) and promoted the MSF principles of action as well as international humanitarian law.**

**Minutes** from the MSF Belgium board of directors, 9 January 1991 (in French)

**Extract:**
5.3 Nobel Prize
Over the medium term, Jean-Pierre Luxen wants MSF Europe to prepare materials for a Nobel Prize nomination.

**Letter** from the Christian Democrat Party of El Salvador to the Nobel Committee, 31 January 1991 (in Spanish)

Dear Sirs:
It is a very unusual opportunity for us to address such a prestigious institution as yours to express very respectfully our wish for you to consider 'Médecins Sans Frontières' for such an important award.
'Médecins Sans Frontières' celebrates its twentieth anniversary in 1991. This symbolic year can be an opportunity to reaffirm our support for their extraordinary and efficient commitment to the underprivileged peoples in all places in crisis, particularly El Salvador.
Their presence has undoubtedly been a determining factor in our country, and in our region, on numerous occasions: thousands of victims of guerrilla warfare, earthquakes, hurricanes and so many other evils have always found in MSF an outstretched hand and an open heart [...]
The deserved moral recognition of this high distinction is a fitting global endorsement of their work, which would give their interventions greater impact and contribute to better protection for their teams in conflict areas.
Certain in the knowledge that you will know how to make the best decision, we thank you for your attention to the present and remain at your entire disposal for any further enquiries.

**Minutes** from the MSF International meeting, 1 February 1991 (in French)

**Extract:**
VII. Nobel Prize
a) MSF France has already begun to put together an administrative dossier in order to:
   - identify the forces driving MSF's efforts.
   - list the various awards received by MSF.

On this basis, the council decides that MSF France will lead this project, especially since it will be chairing MSF International from 1 February 1991.
b) Decision taken to meet in late February to develop an action plan (deadline: 10/10/91). Each section should devise a strategy in the following areas:
   - communications.
   - promotion (for example, organising a conference in Oslo).
   - developing contacts.

c) MSF France's point of departure for helping to achieve this goal is to use humanitarian law as a promotional tool.

**Minutes** from the MSF International meeting, 22 March 1991 (in French)

**Extract:**
2. Nobel Prize
2.1 Why this year?
A number of times in recent years, MSF has been among the three to five finalists for the Nobel Peace Prize. Last year, the prize was awarded to an individual (Mikhail Gorbachev) and there is every reason to believe that next time it will go to an organisation.

1. See the list of criteria for qualified nominators at https://www.nobelprize.org/nomination/peace/.

MSF's credibility and international recognition have grown over the past 12-18 months, especially due to its work in Liberia, Somalia and the Persian Gulf. The fact that the movement is celebrating its twentieth anniversary also has symbolic significance.
As a result, there is every reason to make the necessary efforts now to be in a good position during the selection process, which will take place on 10 October.

2.2. Steps MSF should take
(1) In the area of communications, we should target the international media (such as *The Economist* and *Newsweek*, which are read in Scandinavia and worldwide), which we do not reach out to enough.
(2) Intensify outreach and fundraising in Scandinavia.
(3) Develop a joint message on humanitarian action.

Raise awareness among international decision-makers (governments, media, international organisations, etc.) about issues relating to MSF operations and the principles we promote. As for the Nobel Prize committee itself, no direct action is possible because its members' names are confidential. We can only reach it indirectly.

Specific activities by each section: MSF should make representatives available to participate in these activities, which take time and require travel, including trips to Scandinavia, visits to the Commission on Human Rights and important figures, etc. Even earlier, however, we will need to identify the appropriate contacts and agree on which documents to provide. One such document is the text on humanitarian law, while another is our international brochure, which is currently being developed by the communications departments. September is the final deadline. Considering that not much gets done during the summer months, it's not too early or late to undertake these efforts.

2.3. Draft text on humanitarian law
Text proposed by Rony and distributed last month.
Discussing the problems encountered in the field and the solutions provided by MSF is designed to garner the support of the international community. It's essential for major figures like the Pope and Secretary General of the United Nations to politically support our principles as part of their work.
As a result, it's important to agree on a basic document so that Rony can promote these ideas to the media and during meetings.

Comments:
The proposed document is too specific to the situation in Mozambique and the residents under house arrest. Rony will rewrite it from a more general standpoint.
In practice, there is a humanitarian right to intervene. It has, however, become less a matter of defending the right to intervene than defending the right to provide humanitarian aid; in addition, the relationship between aid and the concept of national sovereignty needs to be better defined. The goal is to determine the boundaries of the 'humanitarian space'.

The issue of individuals' freedom of movement is emblematic of the problems encountered in humanitarian aid, two major examples being the Nazi and Ethiopian concentration camps. It's not enough for a humanitarian agency to go to the area and oversee the way relief is being distributed if the situation experienced by those receiving aid flagrantly violates all humanitarian principles. One notorious example is the Red Cross visits to the concentration camps. According to humanitarian ethics, assistance should be delivered from one free person to another.

In practice, the freedom of movement concept can be difficult to manage because MSF sometimes provides relief to populations with limited freedom. Nevertheless, the camps that were closed in Thailand actually represent a defence of the right to asylum in certain circumstances. The debate concerns displaced populations in countries at war. In the case of Mozambique, we should use 'diplomacy of small steps', as we have defined it during previous meetings, i.e. expressing disagreement with a situation and refusing to become an accessory to the police or military. This doesn't necessarily mean making a big fuss about the situation, but it's important to remain firm. Explicitly recognising that a certain freedom exists is a condition for its re-establishment.

We also need to highlight MSF's efforts to promote these ideas by emphasising that MSF's message has gained legitimacy due to the organisation's actual response and presence in the field.

How should MSF focus its campaign?
Rather than focusing on humanitarian law, which refers to specific ICRC and UN laws, it might be more advantageous for MSF to focus on action. A good topic might be the issue of forgotten conflicts, especially those in Africa. Because MSF's key asset is action, it should be noted that we have not had a monopoly on clandestine efforts for many years. In terms of humanitarian intervention, there are many other NGOs that can employ practices similar to ours. Nevertheless, MSF remains one of the leading NGOs and is often the only organisation providing aid during 'forgotten' wars. In addition, MSF is one of the few NGOs that consistently speaks out about humanitarian ethics. This year, an organisation rather than an individual is likely to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, so MSF's chances are good. Because the ICRC has already won twice, a third prize would mean that 'there's no one else that deserves it'. In conclusion, we should conduct a campaign focusing on the following two topics:
- humanitarian law
- forgotten wars

Stéphane Devaux's [MSF Belgium Institutional Funds Research Coordinator] communications and fundraising efforts in Scandinavia could be continued and expanded regarding Liberia, for example. This would lay the groundwork for earned media coverage and for an effort to recruit Scandinavian for this type of mission. In Belgium, MSF International's founding meeting could be publicised and we could use the 'humanitarian law' theme.

**Minutes** from the MSF International Council meeting, 18 April 1991 (in French)

**Extract:**
VI. Nobel Peace Prize
The decision will be announced on 10/10/91 and the ceremony will take place on 10/12/91. Rony briefly reviews the factors that will give MSF a significant chance to win the award:
- MSF was one of the three finalists at least once.

- MSF is a true European network (it is easier to give recognition to an international organisation than a national one).
- MSF is celebrating 20 years of life.
- MSF has gained further international stature as an organisation to be reckoned with (especially with regard to the extensive media coverage of its activities).

There's no real strategy, but we need to increase MSF's chances by using every opportunity at hand to get out the word about the organisation, especially in the Scandinavian countries. This will require three to four trips to Oslo and Stockholm by September 1991.

**Minutes**, meeting of MSF France board of directors, 30 August 1991 (in French)

**Extract:**

Audience with Pope John Paul II: Rony Brauman [President of MSF France] and Xavier Emmanuelli [Honorary President of MSF France] met with the Pope in Rome. Rony wanted to discuss with the Holy Father the need for a minimum humanitarian space to enable humanitarian organisations to conduct their activities.

*We were nominated for the Nobel Prize six or seven times before we really tackled the procedures. With the Nobel Prize, you're playing with the big boys. The International Red Cross and the High Commissioner for Refugees have both received it twice. It gives you greater respectability and recognition.*

Dr Jean-Pierre Luxen, MSF Belgium – President 1984-1987, General Director 1988-1994 (in French)

**The same year, during his 'exploration' of Norway's funding opportunities for MSF Belgium, Stéphane Devaux had in mind that the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded by a Norwegian Committee. However, he was told that MSF should avoid being perceived as only a 'Nobel hunter' by the Norwegians. Therefore, he organised a series of conferences and meetings between MSF and Norwegian leaders to promote MSF action and principles in contexts in which Norway was interested.**

*We had been told that the Nobel juries don't like feeling as if a whole armada has been created for the sole purpose of lobbying them for a Nobel. So, we were warned: "Don't overdo it. Promote yourself intelligently by focusing on topics of interest to the Norwegians, such as human rights and advocacy." So, like the non-professionals we were at the time, we conducted a sort of 'marketing' campaign spread out over time that included trips to Norway, presentations every two to three months, etc.*

Stéphane Devaux, MSF Belgium Institutional Fundraising Coordinator, September 1990 - April 1992 then 1993, for MSF International April 1992 - January 1993 (in French).

**When Stéphane was recruited as 'international financial coordinator', he was also interviewed about his connections in Norway and his knowledge of the Nobel Peace Prize system by Rony Brauman, the President of the International council, who was very eager for MSF to get the prize.**

*It was really Rony [Brauman, President of MSF France] who wanted the Nobel Prize for MSF. The Belgians had nothing to do with it and the Dutch, who were attending restructuring meetings every two weeks, had other things to worry about. During my interview for the job of financial coordinator at the international office, Rony wanted to know more about my contacts in Norway for the Nobel Prize. I also think that he was the one who selected me at the end of the international office's recruitment process and not only for fundraising purposes. He said, "Stéphane has contacts. We need to continue exploring this angle and holding events to promote our nomination for the Nobel; we can't let up; etc."*

Stéphane Devaux, MSF Belgium Institutional Fundraising Coordinator, September 1990 - April 1992 then 1993, for MSF International April 1992 - January 1993 (in French).

**MSF was not awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991.[2] But eight years later, on 15 October 1999, by when MSF leaders had abandoned all hopes and efforts, the media announced the Nobel Committee's decision to award the Nobel Peace Prize to MSF "in recognition of the organisation's pioneering humanitarian work on several continents".**

"Doctor's Group of Volunteers Awarded Nobel", ***The New York Times*** (USA), 16 October 1999 (in English).

**Extract:**

Doctors Without Borders, which sends medical personnel to some of the most destitute and dangerous parts of the world and encourages them not only to save lives, but also to condemn the injustices they see, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize today. Founded here in 1971 as Médecins Sans Frontières by a band of French doctors disillusioned with the neutrality of the Red Cross, the volunteer group now has more than 2,000 personnel who are treating the wounded, the sick and the starving in 80 countries, including 20 war zones. Over the years, the group has been expelled from several countries for denouncing what it saw as wrong. In 1985, it was banned from Ethiopia for saying the Government had diverted aid and forced migration. In late 1995, the group withdrew from Zaire and Tanzania and denounced the operation of the refugee camps, because, it said, the camps were being controlled by Hutu leaders, who had been responsible for the genocide in neighbouring Rwanda.

In recognizing the work of the organization, the Norwegian Nobel Committee highlighted the willingness to send volunteers quickly to scenes of disaster, regardless of the politics of a situation. And it praised the group for drawing the world's at-

2. It was awarded to Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the opposition party in Burma.

tention to the causes of catastrophes, which "helps to form bodies of public opinion opposed to violations and abuses of power." "In critical situations marked by violence and brutality, the humanitarian world of Doctors Without Borders enables the organization to create openings for contacts between the opposed parties," the citation said. "At the same time, each fearless and self-sacrificing helper shows each victim a human face, stands for respect for that person's dignity, and is a source of hope for peace and reconciliation." [...]

**For the MSF leaders who, for several years, had given up any hope to get the Nobel Peace Prize this award came out of the blue.**

*That day I was sitting with Bernard Pécoul in a meeting in Paris and my phone rang, it was Geir Lundestad, Chair of the Nobel committee, and he said I'm pleased to tell you that MSF has been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. I said, 'Give me your phone number, I will call you back.' I called Delphine [Prinselaar], the MSF International Office Assistant, and asked her to check the phone number, because we had been pranked before. She called me back and said yes that's the Nobel Committee. I called them back and they said, we are going to make the announcement in 15 minutes.' I went to the bathroom, sat, and I thought, 'This is happening. What are we going to do?' The rest is history. The press was there in 15 minutes. As I was in Paris, Philippe Biberson and I went to his office and we talked for a few minutes.*

Dr James Orbinski, MSF International President 1998-2000 (in English).

*James Orbinski was in Paris for a meeting and it was great that he was around. I remember I was in my office with Jean-Hervé [Bradol, MSF France Director of operations] and Karim [Laouabdia, MSF France General Director] when I saw hordes of journalists arriving on their motorbikes, brandishing their microphones. Jean-Hervé said to me, 'You know, Sartre3 turned down the Nobel Prize!' I replied, 'Yeah, right, any other ideas? What other options have we got?' People were knocking on my door, there was a huge commotion going on outside, with the journalists getting really worked up. We were in a bit of a panic; we could see the proportions this thing was going to take. We were trying to decide how to accept it but we'd been caught completely on the hop. My head was empty. Like always, when you're caught off-guard, you're thinking, 'It's no good, I'm not ready.' In the end, I think we got Rony [Brauman, MSF France former president ] on the phone and he said, 'It's great, it's fantastic,' and what have you. So, we emerged from the office saying, 'It's great, it's fantastic,' and took it from there. There were journalists everywhere and I spent the whole day on my scooter going from one TV or radio station to another.*

Dr Philippe Biberson, MSF France President 1994-2000 (in French).

*Ever since I first arrived at the international office in 1995, we'd been preparing a press release just in case. Then, in 1997 or 1998, I said: 'That's it. I've had enough, no more of that.' And that same day I was out of the office in a meeting when I got a phone call from someone saying, 'There's someone from the Nobel Commission on the line for you.' My reaction was, 'Stop messing around!,' aand I put the phone down. In fact, it had been the secretary of the Nobel Commission calling me on the morning of the announcement to tell me we had won the Nobel Prize and I wasn't even there! In earlier years, that would never have happened. I was really caught short. I hadn't prepared anything to say! My communication wasn't up to par that day. But anyway, nobody cared. They don't listen to what you say on the day, anyway. They just want to hear you say how pleased you are.*

Dr Jean-Marie Kindermans, MSF International Secretary General 1995-2000, MSF Belgium President 2002-2010, International Board member 2011-2013 (in French).

**In France, the media coverage of the Nobel Peace Prize announcement gave a large audience to one of the founders of MSF, Bernard Kouchner, who became a prominent politician and had advocated strongly for the international recognition of a 'right to intervene'.**
**Since the early 1990s, MSF had been highly critical about this 'right to intervene'. It was seen as unnecessary, as the Geneva Conventions are a sufficient legal framework for humanitarian action. But it was also seen as damaging for both humanitarian action and peacekeeping activities by blurring the line between independent humanitarian aid and political and military intervention.**
**The confusion created by the media between MSF and its founder, making the association the flag bearer of this 'right to intervene', forced MSF France to publish an op-ed to clarify MSF's stance on this issue.**

'MSF, the generation of the right to intervene', ***Le Monde*** (France), 17 October 1999 (in French)

**Extract:**
From the need to provide care to the right to intervene: this, in short, depicts the mission driving the 'French doctors' for three decades, from the year Médecins Sans Frontières was founded in 1971 until Friday 15 October, when it was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In the wake of May 1968, MSF launched a challenge against poverty, the lack of healthcare and the stifling of victims' cries that has endured to this day. "There's a very French aspect to all this that is universalist, activist and bit arrogant all at the same time", says former MSF President Rony Brauman. MSF is now involved in countless missions, from Kosovo to East Timor. *Le Monde* recaps the history of this generation while exploring the 2,000-strong volunteer organisation as it exists today.

3. The French writer and philosopher Jean Paul Sartre refused the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1964.

"The right to intervene is a deceptive slogan", ***Le Monde*** (France), Rony Brauman and Philippe Biberson, MSF France former and current Presidents, 23 October 1999 (in French).

**Extract:**
The awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to Médecins Sans Frontières delighted and moved everyone who has contributed to the organisation's existence. At the same time, however, we felt a certain degree of embarrassment. At MSF, we have trouble seeing ourselves as the standard bearers of the 'right to intervene', which seems to have been finally acknowledged and sanctioned by the award.

Without denying our pleasure in witnessing this tribute to the work and persistence of thousands of volunteers, and without abandoning our commitment in any way, we cannot allow such a serious misunderstanding to become entrenched. If, even at the margins, we can help change international laws and practices, if we lay claim to this position and have the clear intention of continuing down this path, and if we are not necessarily more inclined than before to venerate sovereignty, it is not because we worship any slogans.

The slogan in question – the "right to intervene' – owes its success to its ambiguity. The expression itself mixes two approaches which, although not mutually exclusive, weaken each other when they are combined:

- the first is independent humanitarian action;
- the second is political and military intervention in situations of mass crime and terror by the major powers and international coalitions.

Both approaches are necessary, but they can only achieve their purposes if they are carried out independently. Politicising relief and assistance, for example, would make them subject to negotiations, bargaining and diversion of funds. In other words, it can reduce aid organisations' room for manoeuvre.

The perception that we have come to intervene is precisely what makes us hostages in the North Caucuses, targets in Burundi and undesirables in Belgrade. Similarly, presenting soldiers from international contingents as volunteers means disarming them, binding them hand and foot, and needlessly risking their lives, as occurred in Bosnia. And, in a monstrous misinterpretation, it may even mean killing in the name of humanitarianism.

Clearly, the 'right to intervene' is a misleading approximation. The Nobel Committee is not responsible for this slogan. In essence, the committee stated that it gave us the award to support independent, impartial, fast and effective action as well as our ability to mobilise public opinion against violence and abuse of power. We ourselves view the jury's motives as reflecting support for a specific type of action, one which can, if necessary, circumvent the obstacles in its way or rise up freely against attempts to appropriate it – action that joins word to deed.

If approximation cannot be explained by close observation of the facts, then perhaps it stems from a craving for the 'lyrical illusion', which has intoxicated and lulled so many minds over the past century. Have we already forgotten the proclamation of 'Year One of Humanitarian Intervention', when Iraq intervened in Kurdistan in the spring of 1991, and again the following year during the disastrous 'Restore Hope' operation in Somalia? Have we forgotten that it was possible for genocide – the sole crime of state forbidden by international law – to be committed in Rwanda, before everyone's eyes, without dampening the vigour of humanitarian speeches in any way?

In other words, are we supposed to believe that, thanks to their Nobel Peace Prize, MSF doctors can now put an end to massacres? Let's ask Boris Yeltsin and the Chechens what they think about that.

The slogan 'humanitarian intervention' not only has the disadvantage of being wrong, which would be reason enough to reject it; by seeming to put states and NGOs on the same level, it casts on the latter the legitimate suspicion that falls on the former when it comes to intervention. Humanitarian volunteers are no more eager than journalists to be confused with soldiers, which inevitably happens when both groups march forth under the same banner.

We also disown the slogan because we know that there is a repertoire of statements and descriptions that make it easy to window-dress causes to create false pictures. This can be seen in the use of terms such as 'humanitarian crises', the immediate effect of which is to transform crimes against humanity and the resulting political responsibilities into simple news items, which may be used to justify a logistical deployment. Another example is the New Age propaganda that consists of turning war into a humanitarian deed since only one word separates 'humanitarian war' from 'humanitarian intervention'.

Humanitarian concerns are now receiving attention on the international stage, which is remarkable progress. Much remains to be done, however, to elicit the necessary international interventions and responses to horror. But this certainly will not be achieved by sanctioning the law of the strongest or by adding obfuscation to confusion. Our secular West tends to view itself as divine providence, capable of killing and protecting alternately or simultaneously, as it pleases and according to its self-interest.

Such confusion is not acceptable. We will probably need to thoroughly restructure the UN. We must take on the major players at this organisation who have the power to block initiatives. The post-war order has been turned upside down, yet the structure of the UN has stayed the same. The makeup of the Security Council, the discretionary use of the veto, and the lack of its own military force are some of the constraints that paralyse its work. These are the shackles that must be cast off in order to lay the foundation for a true 'right to intervene', which would not be an instrument subject to the arbitrary actions of the great powers and regional authorities, but a force for peace capable of punishing dictators, resisting massacres and supporting democratic leaders.

Lastly, I would like to take a moment to extend our warmest regards to Wei Jing Seng and Wang Dan, who came close to winning the Peace Prize. We want them to know that they are our only regret and that we share this honour with them.

**The MSF movement initiated a reflection on the meaning of the award and on the best use of this prize. Questions**

**about the ceremony arose. Some in the French section argued that the historical importance of their section should be reflected. Ultimately, the international council decided that the international dimension of the movement should prevail in both form and content and that the prize money would be used to bolster the access campaign to essential medicines, which had just been launched.**

'**Minutes** from the MSF France's Board of Directors Meeting,' 29 October 1999 (in French).

**Extract:**

Philippe Biberson [MSF France President] proposes a debate on our winning the Nobel Prize in order to hear everyone's reactions and comments and discuss the best use to make of the prize money and the pitfalls to avoid. [...]

Philippe Biberson: As luck would have it, there was an international meeting going on in Paris that day about the [access to essential] medicines campaign. James Orbinski (President of MSF's International Council) and Samantha Bolton (International Communication) were both there. So, we made the most of the coincidence to be really 'international' in our response to the Nobel Prize announcement. We were not at all prepared. [...]. We did ask ourselves what the Nobel Prize had to do with MSF, what could it bring to the MSF project and, if we were to accept it, in what spirit would we do so? We did consider saying no. But MSF isn't Jean-Paul Sartre, and we decided we could probably find ways of using this prize intelligently. Because thousands of anonymous and not so anonymous people who will benefit from the recognition it brings and it wasn't up to us to take that away from them. [...] So, we all more or less agree on the fact that we should use it for something really symbolic, so there's no way the million dollars will simply be paid into the MSF kitty. One of the ideas we've had is to use it for the medicines campaign, for access to medicines in underprivileged countries. It's a real issue for the missions, it's an international project, which has unanimous support from all the MSF sections, and it's also something people will remember. And, with this kind of money we could really do something worthwhile on this project, make some serious advances. [...]

Marc [Gastellu-Etchegorry, MSF France Director of Medical Department]: What will be remembered of the Nobel Prize is the speech. That's what we need to start working on now. Our stance must be perfectly clear, deliberately provocative to show them we're not part of their military-political complex.

'**Minutes** from the MSF Belgium's Board of Directors Meeting,' 5 November 1999 (in French).

**Extract:**

7. Nobel Prize

Alex [Parisel, MSF Belgium General Director] sums up: James [Orbinski, MSF International President] is in charge of preparations (speech, attendance, etc.) for the award ceremony on 10 December in Oslo. Each MSF section can send a quota of people to represent MSF (total of 60). We need the right balance between voluntary workers, volunteers, national staff, former MSF staff, and so on. In terms of our communication strategy, we are clear on the fact that we won't be using this prize to make money. At the operational level, winning the prize doesn't reduce the number of challenges and issues we're faced with. In fact, it draws attention to the right to intervene, which – in a way – we have now come to symbolise. Yet some of the countries we work in or want to work in are not particularly in favour of this right. So, we shouldn't stress this point too much. At MSF Belgium, we want to encourage a tripartite collaboration with GRIP [Group for Research and Information on Peace and Security] (impact of light weapons on civilians) and the International Peace Information Service (diamond trade) in order to conduct research on links between humanitarian aid, the military, and failing states (Kosovo, Timor...). And we would like the general manager and coordinators to be able to hear people like [David] Rieff, [Noam] Chomski talk at a major conference that would make the whole humanitarian aid sector reflect on the roles NGOs now have to play. Internally, MSF Holland is going to launch a Nobel magazine called 'One Shot.' We would like to see it launched internationally. The other sections are interested. The money from the prize should be used to finance a high-profile project on a specific subject, such as forgotten conflicts [...]

'**Minutes** from the MSF Belgium's Board of Directors Meeting,' 19 November 1999 (in French).

**Extract:**

A. 1. What does receiving the prize mean for MSF, why have we got it, do we deserve it?

For James [Orbinski, MSF International President], we deserve this prize. The Nobel Committee is known for its independence and other candidates were perhaps too 'controversial.' As for the theory that we were chosen to avoid any diplomatic friction with China, the committee made its decision at the end of September, before this kind of issue arose. The Nobel Peace Prize: are we a peace organisation? For James, we can't change the world, but we can attempt to bring a bit of humanity to situations where human dignity is not respected: to 'relieve suffering.' But we're not peace workers; we don't try to bring about reconciliation. Humanitarian aid is not a panacea. There are situations in which we can't take action. Nor are we a substitute for political action. So, it's important to define our limits. By awarding us this prize, the Nobel committee may have wanted to mark the end of this century in the same way it marked its beginning, when it awarded it to H. Dunant, by re-launching a concept of independent, civilian humanitarian aid, but in a much-changed context. [...]

A.2. Dangers of accepting this prize

Fear that the Nobel Prize will 'go to our heads' or institutionalise us even further (Marc). For James, there is indeed a danger, and also a paradox here: we are being 'Nobelised' because we show non-respect for everything that puts populations in danger and we are outraged by non-respect for human dignity, yet the Nobel Committee is the most respected committee in the world. We have suddenly become respectable because we show non-respect. We must be careful to stay faithful to who we are and not allow this recognition to change us. If we are aware of the dangers, we should be able to avoid them. This prize can only make us stronger, give us more voice, more credibility. [...]

A.3. Challenges [...]

This event must serve as a catalyst for reinventing ourselves, analysing the hypotheses and paradigms that drive us, and ensuring they are still adapted to the world we live in today a

world, which is constantly changing. What we do is good, but we could do is better. [...] To this, James replies that there may still be many shortcomings and much left to be done, but there is more coherence and sharing than there used to be. The international levels work well, with the operations directors and the general directors. James is optimistic that if we continue along the same lines, the other entities will follow. [...]

**Minutes** from the MSF France's Board of Directors Meeting,' 19 November 1999 (in French).

**Extract:**

Philippe Biberson [MSF France President]: We've spent the last month talking to the other sections, James Orbinski (President of the International Council), the International Office in Brussels, and the Nobel Committee about how best to represent MSF at the award ceremony. Most people here, in the French section, would like to see MSF France feature prominently, given the organisation's history and the important role played by Paris in MSF's construction. We have let it be known that we would like to be there, either when the prize is awarded or (especially) for the speech. There hasn't really been any direct discussion on the subject, but there is general consensus on the medal being received by someone from the field, a representative of our volunteers, and for the speech to be made by the President of the International council, James Orbinski. I met with James a few times to work on the idea of making the speech together, but apparently this arrangement didn't suit some sections, or the Nobel Committee. This point wasn't settled until mid-November when I decided to settle it myself, voluntarily, by accepting the consensus that had emerged. I felt it was about time to start focusing on the content rather than the form. I will therefore be part of the small delegation (James Orbinski, Jean-Marie Kindermans, Samantha Bolton, Eric Stobbaerts, and me) who will have more significant and specific contact with the officials and the press than the other representatives. [...] Each member of the Board and people from the floor then gave their opinion on the practical and symbolic issues surrounding the choice of speaker, the content of the speech [...]

Denis Pingaud [MSF France Director of Communication]: Form matters here. With this choice of speaker, we're seeing a shift in legitimacy. The French section is the most legitimate because of our history, and our legitimacy is being swept aside to follow a kind of bureaucratic logic that I find demagogic. I'm sorry we're not fighting harder for our rightful place and I'm worried that the form we've adopted will also affect the substance of the speech, that it'll lose its provocative edge.

Philippe Biberson: I don't want this board to think it can tell the other sections what to do. I know that's not François and Denis' intention, but we all know that's how the other sections will see it. In my view, there are hundreds of other much more effective ways of getting our ideas across: the Nobel isn't the opportunity we're looking for. I think your resentment is due to living in the past. We can't just forget all the work done by the other sections. If we follow your way of thinking, we might as well ask Kouchner, Emmanuelli, and crew to give the speech. For all these reasons, I won't support these challenges to an international consensus [...]

Decision In Brief: Philippe refuses to turn the question of MSF's representation in Oslo into a legitimacy issue. The choice of representatives (James Orbinski and a volunteer) provides a solution that he and most people at MSF see as dignified, symbolic – both of the primacy of the field and of the non-national nature of the movement – and honourable. However, in light of fears about a lukewarm consensus, Philippe proposes that we react by producing a text that is a true reflection of the ideas the organisation holds dear.

'**Minutes** from the MSF International Council Meeting,' 27 November 1999 (in English).

**Extract:**

Item 3: The Nobel Peace Prize

On October 15, 1999, it was announced that MSF had won the Nobel Peace Prize. The award ceremony will take place on 10 December 1999. Discussion centred on themes and issues to be addressed in the Nobel speech, how MSF will be represented at the ceremony, and how the Nobel Prize money should be spent. The international office is coordinating all Nobel activities and representation in Oslo. Field persons, national staff, representatives from the various headquarters, board presidents, and key historical figures will make up the MSF delegation to Oslo. The current list was reviewed, and in principle endorsed. Pascal Meeus wanted it noted for the record that the delegation should represent primarily field volunteers and national staff, and that, as it stands now, it has too many people from boards and headquarters. Marie-Eve Rageneau will receive the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the MSF movement, and James Orbinski will give the Nobel speech. James Orbinski has consulted widely in the movement and has established an informal committee to define themes for the speech.

*Some people suggested that, because MSF was originally a French organisation, the prize should have been awarded to MSF France. But Rony and I didn't think that way, it was the rank and file. They thought that the Nobel Prize had been earned by Rony's generation. It's true. WWe had been on the list for a long time because Claude Malhuret had been lobbying hard to take us down that road. I think it was because of the attitude, the philosophy developed back then, and that year's media exposure that we got the Nobel Prize. But it was important not to personify the event. It was good that nobody hogged the limelight.*

Dr Philippe Biberson, MSF France President 1994-2000 (in French).

*There was some turmoil around the French wanting to be the ones doing the speech. Passions were what they are. It was just very clear that it just wouldn't happen because, for the rest of the movement, there was no way. Quite rightly, MSF, is a movement. It was one of the ideas that emerged in these moments.*

Dr James Orbinski, MSF International President 1998-2000 (in English).

*There were these discussions: Should the International President receive this prize and give the lecture or should it be the French one, [such as] Philippe Biberson? Would it be naturally because MSF was created in France? But, by that time the international [movement] was pretty strong. There was no way that the international [movement] would have let a national president do it.*

Dr Morten Rostrup, MSF Norway President 1996-2000, MSF International President 2000-2003, International Board member 2011-2014 (in English).

**On 10 December at the Oslo City Hall, Dr Marie-Eve Ragueneau, a MSF volunteer from the field, accepted the Nobel Peace Prize medal in the name of MSF. James Orbinski, the MSF International President, read the acceptance speech, which started by a MSF call to the Russian Ambassador in Norway for his country to stop the indiscriminate bombing of civilians in Grozny. In the room, the MSF people were wearing tee shirts with the word Grozny written in bloody letters. Later on, a group of MSFers, wearing the same tee shirts rallied in front of the Russian Embassy with members of Amnesty International and reiterated their call. MSF wanted to use this opportunity to advocate and not simply accept the prize, in the spirit of the organisation.**

Nobel Committee **Presentation Speech**, 10 December 1999 (in English)

**Extract:**

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highness, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Few aims can be more praiseworthy than to combat suffering: to help those in the most desperate situations, whatever their race and wherever they may be, to return to a dignified life. Some persons even have the necessary strength and drive to live up to this ideal. We welcome a few of them today. We do so humbly, recognising that they are representatives of a much greater number of self-sacrificing men and women all over the world. Our thoughts go not least to those who, at this very moment, are working under the most difficult conditions, often putting their own lives at risk, in scenes of the profoundest suffering and degradation.

Every year, Médecins Sans Frontières send out over 2,500 doctors, nurses and other professional helpers to more than 80 countries, where they cooperate with a good 15,000 local personnel. They go where need, suffering and hopelessness are greatest, indeed often catastrophic in nature, regardless of whether the catastrophes are human or natural in origin. We find them in the world's countless refugee camps, as well as among Chinese peasants, Russian prisoners, or the western world's modern city slum-dwellers. They are present in large numbers in Africa – the forgotten continent. [...]

Médecins Sans Frontières blazed new trails in international humanitarian work. The organisation reserved the right to intervene to help people in need irrespective of prior political approval. The essential points for Médecins Sans Frontières are to reach those in need of help as quickly as possible, and to maintain impartiality. They demand freedom to carry out their medical mandate, and to decide for themselves whom to help according to purely humanitarian criteria. What is more, they insist on making human rights violations known. In addition to helping, in other words, they also seek to draw attention to the causes of humanitarian catastrophes. To alleviate distress one must also get to its roots. These were new principles in the field of aid, and have not been uncontroversial. Some said that this was to confuse the issues in ways which might block access to suffering people. Médecins Sans Frontières have been called emergency aid rebels.

The first Nobel Prizes were awarded in 1901, nearly a hundred years ago, at the beginning of the century which will draw to a close in less than a month's time. The first Peace Prize went to Henri Dunant, founder of the Red Cross, who shared it with the peace activist Frédéric Passy. Dunant was goaded into action by happening to be an eye-witness to the incredible carnage at the battle of Solferino in northern Italy in 1859. The award to Dunant came in for criticism. Humanitarian work was not relevant to peace, ran the argument, but simply 'humanised' war. There were, however, grounds for the decision in Nobel's will, which mentions 'fraternity between nations' as one of the criteria for the Peace Prize. What better or more direct expression can there be of this idea of fraternity than to hold out a helping hand to a sufferer, regardless of identity or party?

The peace Alfred Nobel was thinking of when he established the prize was a peace that is rooted in men's hearts and minds. By showing each victim a human face, by showing respect for his or her human dignity, the fearless and selfless aid worker creates hope for peace and reconciliation. That brings us to the heart of the matter, to absolutely fundamental prerequisites for peace. The decision to award the first Peace Prize to humanitarian work was one of the most important decisions in the history of the prize. That we are continuing, at the end of the century, and the millennium, to recognise humanitarian work confirms that the course plotted then was the right one. [...]

A characteristic feature of Médecins Sans Frontières is that, more clearly than anyone else, they combine in their work the two criteria we have mentioned, humanitarian work and work for human rights. They achieve this by insisting on their right to arouse public opinion and to point to the causes of the man-made catastrophes, namely systematic breaches of the most fundamental rights. The award to Médecins Sans Frontières is first and foremost a humanitarian award, maintaining the tradition that goes back to the first award, but it is also a human rights award, and as such it links up with more recent developments in the history of the Peace Prize. [...]

Henri Dunant imagined that there was a neutral zone, which lay outside the spheres of interest of the warring parties and which one could therefore enter with humanitarian aid. Today we see such 'humanitarian zones' invaded by both sides, obliging aid organisations to make political choices and take positions on complicated moral issues. It is precisely in such situations that it becomes especially necessary to preserve one's independence. Médecins Sans Frontières are among the organisations which attach the greatest importance to independence, insisting among other things that half their revenues must come from private donors.

A large number of aid organisations are extensively and selflessly engaged in alleviating suffering all over the world. They all deserve our gratitude and our attention. Médecins Sans Frontières have a distinctive profile, and have managed to preserve many of their original virtues. They are frequently the first to arrive

at the scene of a disaster. The organisation remains pervaded by idealism and willingness to take great risks. It has kept its independence, and seeks systematically to draw attention to violations and distress.
Equally important is the fact that Médecins Sans Frontières have indicated, more clearly than any other organisation, how burdened aid work is in our chaotic world with political and moral dilemmas. The organisation has tried in various ways to adapt to this, and has, sometimes through provocative initiatives, set in motion an absolutely essential discussion of the problematic nature of humanitarian interventions, not only in their aims but also and chiefly in their consequences. Good deeds are important, but they should also lead to good results. Here as so often in life, a balance has to be found between an ethics of conviction and an ethics of responsibility. Through their strategy and their initiatives, Médecins Sans Frontières have unquestionably influenced the whole development of international aid work.
Let us in conclusion remind ourselves that, however chaotic a situation may be, or however difficult the choices one faces, one consideration remains paramount. That is to reduce distress and alleviate suffering. Médecins Sans Frontières provide professional assistance – efficiently – to people who are suffering or in need. The organisation stands for an open helping hand, extended across borders, through conflicts, and into political chaos. It is by never compromising over this paramount mandate that one can achieve outward legitimacy and inner inspiration. This self-sacrificing commitment kindles in us all the belief that the next century may be better and more peaceful than this century's age of extremism. It is this self-sacrificing effort which we honour here today.

'**Nobel Lecture** by James Orbinski, MSF International President,' 10 December 1999 (in English).

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highness, Members of the Norwegian Nobel Committee, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:
The people of Chechnya, and the people of Grozny, today and for more than three months, are enduring indiscriminate bombing by the Russian army. For them, humanitarian assistance is virtually unknown. It is the sick, the old, and the infirm who cannot escape Grozny. While the dignity of people in crisis is so central to the honour you give today, what you acknowledge in us is our particular response to it. I appeal here today to his Excellency the Ambassador of Russia and through him, to President Yeltsin, to stop the bombing of defenceless civilians in Chechnya. If conflicts and wars are an affair of the state, violations of humanitarian law, war crimes, and crimes against humanity apply to all of us. [...]

The honour you give us today could so easily go to so many organizations, or worthy individuals, who struggle in their own society. But clearly, you have made a choice to recognize MSF. We began formally in 1971 as a group of French doctors and journalists, who decided to make themselves available to assist. This meant sometimes a rejection of the practices of states that directly assault the dignity of people. Silence has long been confused with neutrality, and has been presented as a necessary condition for humanitarian action. From its beginning, MSF was created in opposition to this assumption. We are not sure that words can always save lives, but we know that silence can certainly kill. Over our 28 years we have been, and are today, firmly and irrevocably committed to this ethic of refusal. This is the proud genesis of our identity, and today we struggle as an imperfect movement, but strong in thousands of volunteers and national staff, and with millions of donors who support both financially and morally, the project that is MSF. This honour is shared with all who in one way or another, have struggled and do struggle every day to make live the fragile reality that is MSF.

Humanitarianism occurs where the political has failed or is in crisis. We act not to assume political responsibility, but firstly to relieve the inhuman suffering of failure. The act must be free of political influence, and the political must recognize its responsibility to ensure that the humanitarian can exist. Humanitarian action requires a framework in which to act. In conflict, this framework is international humanitarian law. It establishes rights for victims and humanitarian organisations and fixes the responsibility of states to ensure respect of these rights and to sanction their violation as war crimes. Today this framework is clearly dysfunctional. Access to victims of conflict is often refused. Humanitarian assistance is even used as a tool of war by belligerents. And more seriously, we are seeing the militarisation of humanitarian action by the international community. In this dysfunction, we will speak-out to push the political to assume its inescapable responsibility. Humanitarianism is not a tool to end war or to create peace. It is a citizen's response to political failure. It is an immediate, short-term act that cannot erase the long-term necessity of political responsibility.

And ours is an ethic of refusal. It will not allow any moral political failure or injustice to be sanitized or cleansed of its meaning. The 1992 crimes against humanity in Bosnia-Herzegovina. The 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The 1997 massacres in Zaire. The 1999 actual attacks on civilians in Chechnya. These cannot be masked by terms like 'Complex Humanitarian Emergency,' or 'Internal Security Crisis.' Or, by any other such euphemism, as though they are some random, politically undetermined event. Language is determinant. It frames the problem and defines response, rights, and therefore responsibilities. It defines whether a medical or humanitarian response is adequate. And it defines whether a political response is inadequate. No one calls a rape a complex gynaecologic emergency. A rape is a rape, just as a genocide is a genocide. And both are a crime. For MSF, this is the humanitarian act: to seek to relieve suffering, to seek to restore autonomy, to witness to the truth of injustice, and to insist on political responsibility.

The work that MSF chooses does not occur in a vacuum, but in a social order that both includes and excludes, that both affirms and denies, and that both protects and attacks. Our daily work is a struggle, and it is intensely medical, and it is intensely personal. MSF is not a formal institution, and with any luck at all, it never will be. It is a civil society organization, and today civil society has a new global role, a new informal legitimacy that is rooted in its action and in its support from public opinion. It is also rooted in the maturity of its intent, in for example the human rights, the environmental and the humanitarian movements, and of course, the movement for equitable trade. Conflict and violence are not the only subjects of concern. We, as members of civil society, will maintain our role and our power if we remain lucid in our intent and independence. As civil society we exist relative to the state, to its institutions and its power. We also exist relative to other non-state actors such as the private sector. Ours is not to displace the responsibility of the state. Ours is

not to allow a humanitarian alibi to mask the state responsibility to ensure justice and security. And ours is not to be co-managers of misery with the state. If civil society identifies a problem, it is not theirs to provide a solution, but it is theirs to expect that states will translate this into concrete and just solutions. Only the state has the legitimacy and power to do this.

Today, a growing injustice confronts us. More than 90% of all death and suffering from infectious diseases occurs in the developing world. Some of the reasons that people die from diseases like AIDS, TB, Sleeping Sickness and other tropical diseases is that lifesaving essential medicines are either too expensive, are not available because they are not seen as financially viable, or because there is virtually no new research and development for priority tropical diseases. This market failure is our next challenge. The challenge however, is not ours alone. It is also for governments, international governmental institutions, the pharmaceutical industry, and other NGOs to confront this injustice. What we, as a civil society movement demand is change, not charity.

We affirm the independence of the humanitarian from the political, but this is not to polarize the 'good' NGO against 'bad' governments, or the 'virtue' of civil society against the 'vice' of political power. Such a polemic is false and dangerous. As with slavery and welfare rights, history has shown that humanitarian preoccupations born in civil society have gained influence until they reach the political agenda. But these convergences should not mask the distinctions that exist between the political and the humanitarian. Humanitarian action takes place in the short term, for limited groups and for limited objectives. This is at the same time, both its strength and its limitation. The political can only be conceived in the long term, which itself is the movement of societies. Humanitarian action is by definition universal, or it is not. Humanitarian responsibility has no frontiers. Wherever in the world there is manifest distress, the humanitarian by vocation must respond. By contrast, the political knows borders, and where crisis occurs, political response will vary because historical relations, balance of power, and the interests of one or the other must be considered. The time and space of the humanitarian are not those of the political. These vary in opposing ways, and this is another way to locate the founding principles of humanitarian action: the refusal of all forms of problem solving through sacrifice of the weak and vulnerable. No victim can be intentionally discriminated against, OR neglected to the advantage of another. One life today cannot be measured by its value tomorrow: and the relief of suffering 'here,' cannot legitimize the abandoning of relief 'over there.' The limitation of means naturally must mean the making of choice, but the context and the constraints of action do not alter the fundamentals of this humanitarian vision. It is a vision that by definition must ignore political choices.

Today there is a confusion and inherent ambiguity in the development of so-called 'military humanitarian operations.' We must reaffirm with vigour and clarity, the principle of an independent civilian humanitarianism. And we must criticize those interventions called 'military-humanitarian.' Humanitarian action exists only to preserve life, not to eliminate it. Our weapons are our transparency, the clarity of our intentions, as much as our medicines and our surgical instruments. Our weapons cannot be fighter jets and tanks, even if sometimes we think their use may respond to a necessity. We are not the same, we cannot be seen to be the same, and we cannot be made to be the same. Concretely, this is why we refused any funding from NATO member states for our work in Kosovo. And this is why we were critical then and are critical now of the humanitarian discourse of NATO. It is also why on the ground, we can work side by side with the presence of armed forces, but certainly not under their authority.

The debate on the 'droit d'ingerence,' [right of interference] the right of state intervention for so-called humanitarian purposes, is further evidence of this ambiguity. It seeks to put at the level of the humanitarian, the political question of the abuse of power, and to seek a humanitarian legitimacy for a security action through military means. When one mixes the humanitarian with the need for public security, then one inevitably tars the humanitarian with the security brush. It must be recalled that the UN charter obliges states to intervene sometimes by force to stop threats to international peace and security. There is no need, and indeed a danger, in using a humanitarian justification for this. In Helsinki this weekend, governments will sit down to establish the makings of a European army, but to be available for humanitarian purposes. We appeal to governments to go no further down this path of dangerous ambiguity. But we also encourage states to seek ways to enforce public security so that international humanitarian and human rights law can be respected.

Humanitarian action comes with limitations. It cannot be a substitute for political action. In Rwanda, early in the genocide, MSF spoke out to the world to demand that genocide be stopped by the use of force. And, so did the Red Cross. It was however, a cry that met with institutional paralysis; with acquiescence to self-interest, and with a denial of political responsibility to stop a crime that was 'never again' to go unchallenged. The genocide was over before the UN Operation Turquoise was launched. [...] There are limits to humanitarianism. No doctor can stop a genocide. No humanitarian can stop ethnic cleansing, just as no humanitarian can make war. And no humanitarian can make peace. These are political responsibilities, not humanitarian imperatives. Let me say this very clearly: the humanitarian act is the most apolitical of all acts, but if its actions and its morality are taken seriously, it has the most profound of political implications. And the fight against impunity is one of these implications.

This is exactly what has been affirmed with the creation of the international criminal courts for both the Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda. It is also what has been affirmed with the adoption of statutes for an International Criminal Court. These are significant steps. But today on the 51th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the court does not yet exist, and the principles have only been ratified by three states in the last year. At this rate it will take 20 years before the court comes into being. Must we wait this long? Whatever the political costs of creating justice for states, MSF can and will testify that the human costs of impunity are impossible to bear. Only states can impose respect for humanitarian law and that effort cannot be purely symbolic. Srebrenica was apparently a safe haven in which we were present. The UN was also present. It said it would protect. It had Blue Helmets on the ground. And the UN stood silent and present, as the people of Srebrenica were massacred. After the deadly attempts of UN intervention in Former Yugoslavia and Rwanda which led to the death of thousands.

MSF objects to the principle of military intervention, which does not stipulate clear frameworks of responsibility and transparency. MSF does not want military forces to show that they can put up

refugee tents faster than NGOs. Armies should be at the service of governments and policies, which seek to protect the rights of victims. If UN military operations are to protect civilian populations in the future, going beyond the "mea culpa" excuses of the Secretary General over Srebrenica and Rwanda, there must be a reform of peacekeeping operations in the UN. Member States of the Security Council must be held publicly accountable for the decisions that they do or do not vote for. Their right to veto should be regulated. Member States should be bound to ensure that adequate means are made available to implement the decisions they take.

Yes, humanitarian action has limits. It also has responsibility. It is not only about rules of right conduct and technical performance. It is at first an ethic framed in a morality. The moral intention of the humanitarian act must be confronted with its actual result. And it is here, where any form of moral neutrality about what is good, must be rejected. The result can be the use of the humanitarian in 1985 to support forced migration in Ethiopia, or the use in 1996 of the humanitarian to support a genocidal regime in the refugee camps of Goma. Abstention is sometimes necessary so that the humanitarian is not used against a population in crisis. More recently, in North Korea, we were the first independent humanitarian organization to gain access in 1995. However, we chose to leave in the fall of 1998. Why? Because we came to the conclusion that our assistance could NOT be given freely and independent of political influence, from the state authorities. We found that the most vulnerable were likely to remain so, as food aid is used to support a system that in the first instance, creates vulnerability and starvation among millions. Our humanitarian action must be given independently, with a freedom to assess, to deliver, and to monitor assistance so that the most vulnerable are assisted first. Aid must not mask the causes of suffering, and it cannot be simply an internal or foreign policy tool that creates rather than counters human suffering. If this is the case, we must confront the dilemma and consider abstention as the least of bad options. As MSF, we constantly call into question the limits and ambiguities of humanitarian action, particularly when it submits in silence to the interests of states and armed forces. [...]

Independent humanitarianism is a daily struggle to assist and protect. In the vast majority of our projects it is played out away from the media spotlight, and away from the attention of the politically powerful. It is lived most deeply, most intimately in the daily grind of forgotten war and forgotten crisis. Numerous peoples of Africa literally agonise in a continent rich in natural resources and culture. Hundreds of thousands of our contemporaries are forced to leave their lands and their family to search for work, food, to educate their children, and to stay alive. Men and women risk their lives to embark on clandestine journeys only to end up in a hellish immigration detention centre, or barely surviving on the periphery of our so-called civilized world. Our volunteers and staff live and work among people whose dignity is violated every day. These volunteers choose freely to use their liberty to make the world a more bearable place. Despite grand debates on world order, the act of humanitarianism comes down to one thing: individual human beings reaching out to their counterparts who find themselves in the most difficult circumstances. One bandage at a time, one suture at a time, one vaccination at a time. And, uniquely for Médecins Sans Frontières, working in around 80 countries, over 20 of which are in conflict, telling the world what they have seen. All this in the hope that the cycles of violence and destruction will not continue endlessly.

As we accept this extraordinary honour, we want again to thank the Nobel Committee for its affirmation of the right to humanitarian assistance around the globe. For its affirmation of the road MSF has chosen to take: to remain outspoken, passionate, and deeply committed to its core principles of volunteerism, impartiality, and its belief that every person deserves both medical assistance and the recognition of his or her humanity. We would like to take this opportunity to state our deepest appreciation to the volunteers and national staff who have made these ambitious ideals a concrete reality, and who have, we believe, brought some peace to the world that has experienced such immense suffering and who are the living reality of MSF.

*Initially, a group of five or six people was formed to write the speech. But five people can't write one text; it's just not possible. In the end, Françoise [Bouchet-Saulnier] wrote a lot of it and James added his own stories, the bit about Rwanda. We wanted to ask him not to include that part, but we had to go along with it. I went to see the representative of the Nobel Committee and said, 'I'm sorry, we're a bit disorganised.' And he said, 'Don't worry, last year it was the Palestinians and the Israelis! With you there are zero problems!' Even going into a room and standing in front of the Russian ambassador wearing 'Stop bombing Grozny' tee-shirts, our way of being rebellious, was not a problem for them. And all that went a long way towards legitimising the office of international president. Since then, nobody has ever been heard to say, 'No, we don't need a permanent President.'*

Dr Jean-Marie Kindermans, MSF International General Secretary, 1995-2000 (in French).

*There are many dimensions to that story of the speech being finalised during the night. For me, it was very important that we have broad consultation and that a lot of people have an opportunity to participate. So, that went on for many weeks; there were several drafts that we were working with. At the end of the day, we finished it the night before. The other thing that isn't well known in the collective memory of MSF is that, in fact, the speech was lost. I gave a floppy disk to Samantha Bolton to print at 4 am. First of all, her computer crashed and we had to get somebody in who could re-install the software at 4 am. Norwegian software - it was impossible to do. In the process of doing that, somehow the disk had been erased. I was asleep. Samantha pounded on my door weeping! Everybody was panicking. I just took my computer, I took the garbage pail, which had all these printed versions, drafts, notes, and I had a working draft, it wasn't completely lost. I literally locked myself in the bathroom and just did it. We printed it out and got it to the Nobel committee so they could give it to translators. And then I had a version, where I put in all these little notes, when to pause, and that was that. The idea of appealing to the Russians came very much around the last day or so. We needed something to really anchor it in the reality of that moment. The actual war in Chechnya at that time was a huge issue inside MSF, and yet it was so difficult to find the right opportunity, the right communication strategy on it.*

Dr James Orbinski, MSF International President 1998-2000 (in English).