To: MSF-Belgium / MSF-France
Att: Directors (general and operations)
From: Roelf Padt
Date: February 4, 1991
Ref: RP/AvR/01/91
Re: Negative consequences of public statements on situation Somalia
Pages: 5 (including cover page)
Faxno: DIV 505

Please be informed about possible negative consequences of MSF acting too much as a press agency, as in our view has been the case with Stephan van Preet's statements to Reuter and on the BBC radio, regarding the political and military situation in Mogadishu last week.

As can be concluded from this Uganda-example, MSF is clearly putting in jeopardy its neutral position, which is the key to our success in sensitive areas.

Please refer to attached documents.

Regards,

Roelf
TO THE DIRECTOR
MSF AMSTERDAM

REF: NEUTRALITY OF MSF

FOLLOWING THIS LETTER IS A MEMO FROM TOM KAPTIJN, LOGISTICS OFFICER SOROTI EXPRESSING HIS CONCERNS REGARDING STATEMENTS ATTRIBUTED TO MSF PERSONNEL IN MOGADISHU.

AS YOU WILL BE AWARE, SOROTI IS AN INSECURE AREA AND FOR SOME TIME NOW, MSF HAS BEEN ABLE TO CARRY OUT ITS WORK WITH FEW PROBLEMS BECAUSE OF THE PRINCIPLE OF NEUTRALITY WHICH WAS WIDELY UNDERSTOOD BY ALL PARTIES TO THE CONFLICT.

IT IS APPARENT THAT THE ARTICLES IN THE NEW VISION (COPY ATTACHED) AND NEWS ITEMS ON THE BBC HAVE BEEN HEARD AND DIGESTED BY A NUMBER OF PARTIES IN SOROTI AND THAT SIGNIFICANT DOUBTS REGARDING MSF'S NEUTRALITY HAVE BEEN RAISED. MY DEEP CONCERN IS THAT THESE DOUBTS, IF ALLOWED TO GO UNCHALLENGED, WILL TRANSCLUDE INTO PHYSICAL PROBLEMS WHICH COULD ALSO ENDANGER THE SAFETY OF OUR PERSONNEL IN THE FIELD.

ACCORDINGLY, I STRONGLY REQUEST THAT YOU GIVE THIS MATTER YOUR URGENT ATTENTION TO ENSURE THAT OTHER MSF'S ARE AWARE OF THE PROBLEMS THAT CAN BE CREATED BY CARELESS COMMENTS THAT COMPROMISE THE NEUTRALITY OF THE ORGANISATION AND THE SAFETY OF ALL.

MALCOM WALKER

CC TOM KAPTIJN
ALBERTIEN
I would like to express my concern about our policy.

After reading the "heroic" adventures of our colleague, in Mogadishu, Somalia, I was wondering how it could be possible, that MSF's name is used in these articles.

But when I read yesterday's NEW VISION, our local Ugandan newspaper, it was more than being surprised.

My first reaction was: Are they using their brains, or is somebody gone berserk?

The article from which you can read a copy, send with this letter.

After this publication I was stopped by a NRA army representative who stated that he would like to have a meeting with me. In this meeting he expressed that he, nor his superiors were pleased with what they had been reading. And that they were wondering whether they have told stories about MSF's so-called neutrality.

And if I could give them some sort of explanation, I had to explain that even amongst ourselves, we were unpleasantly surprised. And that I would inquire how this whole matter came to happen.

Besides this incident, there are also other groups active in this country, also reading newspapers, and in bad need of a good press agent. Uganda might not be hot news, internationally, but what is going on here is not just some local problem.

Therefore I would like to have a sort of reaction from the side of the coordination.

Greetings, Tom Kaptijn, for MSF

SOROTI Jan. 29 1991
Pursuit on the issue

Today I wrote the first part of the letter, here is part two of the story:

Yesterday I was asked about MSF's policer by a small soldier, (small=non important) Today two majors approched me, expressing the same concern.

Uptil here I managed to dodge them, and maintaining the good cooperation between us, but I would like to give some sort of reply.

Besides all this, we MSF'ers, also discussed the issue, of course, and, I hope we don't have to remind you on the letter, written to us by one of the mayor rebelleaders, recently.

In case we do have to, here is a small content of it: "We are looking for publicity, and we are asking you people to do it for us. We know that MSF has been giving opportunitities to other rebel groups in Africa. Like what happened in Liberia.

This thing has been discussed between ourselves, as well as with our coordination.

My suggestion would be, sort your problem with counterparts first, and, for the meantime, let us stick to the rules and regulations we all agreed upon.

Otherwise our opinion can only be that you are unnecessarily endangering our positions here.

This might sound harsh, but we think it the time to express ourselves.

Open and eager for your reply we remain (of course)

For MSF'ers Soroti
Tom Kaptijn,
Logistics Soroti.
Barre flees palace

Nairobi Sunday-SOMALI President Mohamed Siad Barre fled from his presidential palace on Sunday after four weeks of heavy fighting between his forces and rebels of the United Somali Congress, an official of the international medical charity Medecins Sans Frontieres (MSF) said.

Stefan van Paaet of Reuters said that MSF workers in the Somali capital, Mogadishu, reported that Barre had fled in a tank to an unknown destination.

"It's true he fled this morning and 15 minutes later rebels took over the presidential palace," he said.

Van Paaet added that government forces still appeared to be in control of the airport and that heavy fighting was taking place in many areas of the capital.

Telev and telephone links to Somalia have been cut since

the United Somali Congress (USC) launched its offensive on December 10. The news from the MSF workers came after a satellite telephone link-up to Mogadishu.

State Radio, which has remained in government hands since the fighting began, appeared also to have fallen to the rebels.

A USC broadcast early on Sunday said: "As you are aware last night the government and responsibility of the Somali people were taken over by the USC movement. We are addressing you from Radio Mogadishu, the voice of the Somali people."

The broadcast called on the people not to take advantage of the situation to loot their neighbours and call for peace.

Reuters