

This Day in History... December 22, 1971

Doctors Without Borders

On December 22, 1971, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), or Doctors Without Borders was founded. The international humanitarian non-governmental organization provides medical aid in times of crisis around the world.

The organization's history dates to the Nigerian Civil War of 1967 to 1970. During that conflict, the Nigerian military established a blockade around the newly-independent Biafra. Most nations sided with the Nigerian government, but France was one of the few to support the Biafrans.



Fighting malnutrition, especially among children, is often a significant aspect of MSF missions.



MSF provides medicine and vaccines to developing countries in need.

This mission was their first in an active war zone, where they would come under enemy fire. Their nine years in Lebanon earned the MSF recognition for its ability to remain neutral and provide healthcare under fire. The 1970s and 80s saw some conflict within the organization. Some believed they should speak out about the suffering they saw, with others said they shouldn't criticize governments and should remain neutral.

The 1980s and 90s saw rapid expansion of the MSF, with support sections opening in over a dozen countries, including the US in 1990. In addition to



MSF missions also often set up equipment to provide clean drinking water.

A group of French doctors then joined the French Red Cross in traveling to Biafra to provide aid in hospitals and other institutions. These volunteers were attacked, and some killed by the blockading forces. By the time they returned home, these doctors realized that a new organization was necessary to help all victims, regardless of political or religious issues.

Initially, two separate groups formed. The first, the Groupe d'Intervention Médicale et Chirurgicale en Urgence (Emergency Medical and Surgical Intervention Group) – composed of doctors who had gone to Biafra. The other group, Secours Médical Français (French Medical Relief) was founded by the editor of the French Medical Journal following the 1970 Bhola cyclone that killed over 500,000 people. Then on December 22, 1971, the two groups merged to form Médecins Sans Frontières, also known as Doctors Without Borders.

The first mission undertaken by this new agency was in response to an earthquake in Managua, Nicaragua, in 1972. Then in 1974, they established their first long-term mission in Honduras in response to Hurricane Fifi. Following the Fall of Saigon in 1975, millions of Cambodians escaped to Thailand out of fear of the Khmer Rouge. The MSF went to the Thailand and set up its first refugee camp. When the Vietnamese left Cambodia in 1989, MSF helped rebuild their healthcare system.

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doctors and nurses, MSF field teams usually include several volunteers that help provide security, vehicle maintenance, food preparation, electrical work, and more.

Many MSF missions include vaccination campaigns and AIDS treatments. They also work with local hospitals to improve sanitation, train staff, and provide new medicine and equipment. MSF missions often must address malnutrition and help provide clean drinking water. In 1999, they launched the Campaign for Access to Essential Medicines to increase available medicines in developing countries. Also in 1999, MSF received the Nobel Peace Prize. Today, the MSF is active in over 70 countries with a staff of over 35,000. It's estimated they've treated over 100 million patients.



Doctors who apply must have experience working in a developing country, two years of professional experience, supervisory experience, and computer and foreign language skills.



MSF nurses must have at least three years of experience.



Depending on the conditions, MSF will build or update hospitals.

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