



Summary

Following the ambush and killing of two Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) employees in the Boucle du Mouhoun region of Burkina Faso, this brief presents findings on public sentiment expressed online by Burkinabé social media users. Based on social data extracted from the Twitter and Facebook platforms, the study finds that social media users do not show much understanding of humanitarian principles and that many hold misinformed and very negative views about MSF's work. Many commentators welcomed the decision to suspend MSF activities in the Boucle du Mouhoun region, while others falsely alleged that the organisation is aiding armed groups and acting on behalf of Western governments. Moreover, reactions indicate that MSF's stated intention to initiate dialogue with all conflict parties was widely rejected as an attempt to put the Islamic armed groups on an equal footing with the Burkinabé armed forces.

This analysis highlights general misconceptions around humanitarian work that are unlikely to be limited only to MSF's interventions.

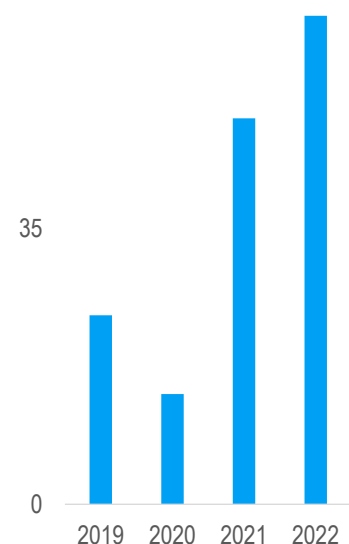
Context

On 8 February 2023, on the road between Dédougou and Tougan localities in Boucle du Mouhoun region, Burkina Faso, an unidentified group of armed men **ambushed and attacked** a marked Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) vehicle, resulting in the deaths of two staff members, while two others managed to escape. Following the incident, MSF **suspended** its activities in the region except for vitally urgent aid. In its **declaration** issued on the day of the incident, MSF described it as “a deliberate and intentional attack on a clearly identified humanitarian team in the context of a medical mission” and pledged to “quickly exchange with all conflict parties to understand what happened”.

This attack took place in a context of a long-running deterioration of security in Burkina Faso. In 2022, 65 incidents of violence against or obstruction of health care in Burkina Faso were identified. In recent years insecurity has spread from the north-eastern regions of the country to other areas, including the Boucle du Mouhoun region.

As Burkina Faso grapples with the turmoil resulting from the cycles of violence it has experienced, its political system has become increasingly unstable. The current military leadership, in power since the coup of October 2022, has put Burkina Faso firmly on the path taken previously by neighbouring Mali to limit French presence and influence and to deepen relations with Russia. This process has also been accompanied by increased spreading of **pro-Russian content** on social media.

Reported incidents affecting health care in Burkina Faso, 2019-2022



Source: [Insecurity Insight](#)

Methodology

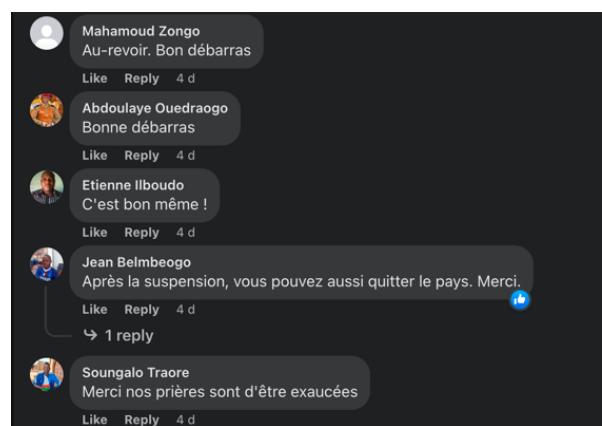
The present brief is based on public social media data collected with the use of AI-powered software. This software is fed Boolean search queries designed to collect social data based on key terms and associations. The data is then downloaded and manually cleaned and classified.

Data was collected for an 11-day period from 8 to 18 February 2023. The public social data was extracted from Twitter and Facebook, including original posts and replies. Following a manual cleaning process, ethnographic analysis techniques are used to examine individual posts.

The study has two main limitations. Firstly, the social data collected is in French. Although French is Burkina Faso's official language, data collection limited to French excludes posts and tweets written in indigenous languages. Secondly, the data used does not include private social data, thus excluding platforms such as WhatsApp.

Main findings

While some social media users deplored the deadly attack and the killing of the two MSF employees, in general public reaction on Twitter and Facebook towards the healthcare organisation following the incident tended to show little or no understanding of the humanitarian principles that guide MSF's work. Instead, commentators often alleged that MSF provided healthcare to members of armed groups and that it acted as an agent of Western governments.



Based on these assumptions, many commentators welcome the suspension of MSF activities in the Boucle du Mouhoun region. Moreover, reactions indicated that MSF's stated intention to initiate dialogue with all conflict parties was rejected as an attempt to put the Islamic armed groups on an equal footing with the Burkinabé armed forces. These findings raise questions regarding the extent to which humanitarian principles are understood within the wider Burkinabé society and what aid agencies can do to counter such misinformed interpretations of their intentions.

- **Allegations that MSF helps armed groups**

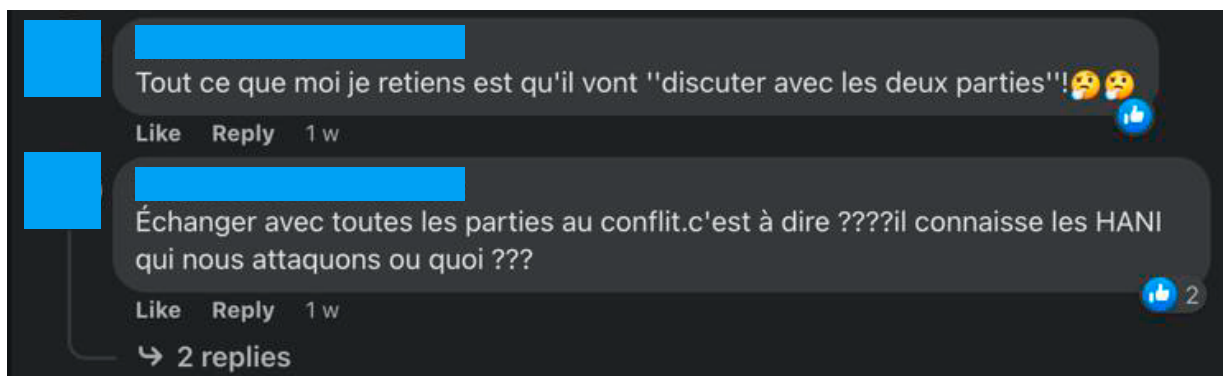
Reacting to the incident involving MSF employees, a notable number of social media users accused the healthcare organisation of aiding and providing health care to the armed rebel groups currently plaguing the sub-Saharan country. For example, one commentator wrote, "It is you who at the same time [medically] treats our enemies, no? Now that they are attacking you, you want to analyse and dissect".

One social media user, while lamenting the death of the MSF employees, argued that "non-governmental organisations should cease aiding and treating armed groups. ... Helping soldiers is legitimate, but aiding and treating terrorist groups is inconceivable". Another reaction to reports of the suspension of MSF activities in the Boucle du Mouhoun region commented, "They did not close down[;] they are all complicit with terrorism".

- **Incomprehension at MSF's intention to initiate dialogue with all parties**

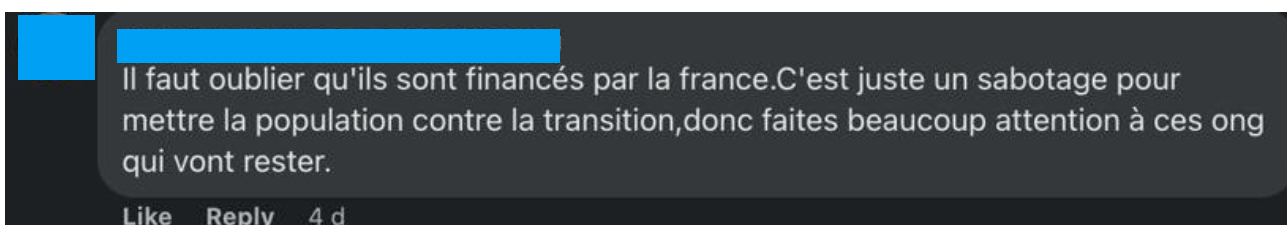
An element that appears to have united all social media users in opposition to MSF, including those who clearly support its work, is the organisation's publicly stated intention published on the day of the incident to initiate dialogue with all the parties to the conflict – including rebel groups. In general, the reaction on social media was one of incomprehension and indignation at what many have interpreted as evidence that MSF and other INGOs have contacts with the Islamic armed groups and that they consider the rebels to be on an equal footing with the national armed forces. Echoing many similar reactions, one social media user said, "all I retain [from the news] is that they will discuss with the two parties", while another commented the following: "Exchanging with all conflict parties, meaning? They know the HANI [hommes armés non identifiés/unidentified armed men] who attack us, or what?"

Indeed, it appears that this announcement has further undermined social media users' trust in the activities of INGOs. One commentator, after reserving condolences for the victims and praise for the healthcare organisation, responded to MSF's declared intention to initiate dialogue with all the conflict parties as follows: "Is MSF trying to make us understand that it also has contacts with the enemy of Burkina Faso? ... In my opinion, if what I am thinking is confirmed, we have to do like our brother country Mali [and] we should be attentive to what all these NGOs are doing in our territory It is inconceivable that 'friends' treat us equally to those who sow death and desolation in our country".



- **Allegations that MSF is an agent of Western governments**

Social media users alleged that MSF is financed by Western governments, in particular France, and is acting on their behalf. Some, indeed, theorised that the attack was orchestrated by the INGO and its paymaster France to sabotage and undermine the current Burkinabé military leadership, whose legitimacy is based on the promise of defeating the armed groups without Western help and improve security in Burkina Faso. Reacting to the incident, one social media user argued that "one must not forget that they are financed by France. This is just sabotage to turn the people against the transition, so pay a lot of attention to these NGOs that will remain". Moreover, suspicious that the ambush was orchestrated, a large number of social media users demanded information on the nationality of the two MSF employees who ostensibly managed to flee, suspecting them to be foreigners.



Profile review

An examination of a sample of relevant social media users did not give any indication that the profiles from which the data was taken had been set up with the intention of spreading mis- or disinformation. The users originated from different regions of Burkina Faso and included people from both Christian and Muslim communities. However, most cited opinions were from men, and few women posted any commentary on the topic.

Concluding remarks

There is a striking absence of any understanding and endorsement of humanitarian principles in the social media comments that were identified. Ignorance about humanitarian principles is unlikely to be new. However, the increasing use of social media to present or discuss false interpretations reinforces such perceptions, which then influence the wider public discourse.

The lack of knowledge about humanitarian principles and the opinions expressed in these social media accounts raise important questions regarding how aid agencies can better communicate humanitarian principles outside of the humanitarian bubble.

Protection for the humanitarian space requires that the wider society endorses these humanitarian principles and that public opinion is prepared to defend them.

Recommendations for aid agencies

- Monitor the way in which aid programmes are represented on social media and design strategies to counter mis- and disinformation about aid agency objectives.
- Be aware that the humanitarian imperative to provide food and medical aid without discrimination is very easily turned into social media disinformation that accuses aid programmes of favouring a particular social group or even rebel groups.
- Be aware of the extent to which an anti-terrorism discourse has influenced many social media users and that this can mean that humanitarian impartiality may be interpreted as “aiding terrorists” not only among governments, but among the general public too.
- In addition to armed actors, communications about humanitarian principles should probably also engage the wider public to strengthen societal consensus in favour of humanitarian principles.

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