

Ideological rot has hollowed out human rights NGOs



By Danielle Haas

DO YOU know how the world discovered that Doctors Without Borders (MSF) had scaled back at Gaza's Nasser Hospital, citing "armed men, some masked" at the facility?

Not from an MSF press release or a journalist working sources. It surfaced in a WhatsApp group of human rights and humanitarian professionals that I belong to – the kind that many Jewish colleagues turned to after October 7 shattered assumptions of workplace neutrality.

"The MSF international office just buried this near-impossible-to-find update on its website explaining why it's withdrawn from Nasser Hospital (without naming Hamas)," a colleague wrote on February 2. "In any other context this would warrant a press release and robust social media activity. Not a chance it will get noticed."

He was right. The information was entombed in a collapsed FAQ entry at the end of a 17-item list on an ambiguously titled page on MSF's website. It gained traction only after we posted it on X.

That it took an unofficial network of off-duty professionals to surface globally significant news says much about how little attention is paid to human rights and humanitarian organisations.

Media coverage, when there's any at all, tends to flash and fade. These groups make headlines mainly when they pronounce or when they stumble. The MSF-Nasser episode and recent Oxfam racism scandal are cases in point. Serious, ongoing scrutiny of how they actually operate, and whether their claims withstand examination, is rare. Even major institutional mess-ups, and ritual promises of reform that follow, seldom receive meaningful journalistic follow-up.

Formal oversight is similarly thin. For the most part, organisations like MSF, Amnesty, and Human Rights Watch (HRW) – where I worked as senior editor for 14 years – operate under non-binding "principles," "values," and "guidelines," not enforceable standards. When bodies such as the UK Charity Commission do intervene, attention focusses primarily on finances and governance, not on accuracy, methodology, or practice.

We should all be concerned. Collectively, these organisations function as a global soft-power network, shaping policy, education, law, and public discourse. Yet they're not democratically elected, opaque, and only weakly accountable.

After two years trying to raise the alarm, I'm

convinced the problem isn't shrinking newsrooms or divided attention spans, though neither helps.

It's a faulty mindset: we're still chasing big bangs and smoking guns. As CBS News Editor-in-Chief Bari Weiss recently told staff, the focus is on "scoops – not scoops that expire minutes later,

“Even major institutional mess-ups, and ritual promises of reform that follow, seldom receive journalistic follow-up

but investigative scoops.”

But the real story of the human rights and humanitarian world today is quieter and more consequential: the banality of decay.

It's made up of individual incidents and micro-transgressions that seem trivial in isolation. Pieced together, they form a striking picture of ideological rot. Some appear on the "Evidence Wall" of EIGHT, an accountability initiative forged from the WhatsApp group.

They include:

Javid Abdelmoniem, international president of Doctors Without Borders (MSF), who oversees some 65,000 staff and a more than \$2 billion annual budget, reposting claims that Israel is a nation of "child killers," a "colony of settlers," and the "greatest threat to Judaism on planet earth."

Posts on MSF's internal "Souk" platform mocking commitments to "neutrality" and "impartiality" and protocols of use. They include a "Zionism is..." pictogram, with images depicting "scholasticide," "battle-testing murder tech" and "300 Palestinian children in cages/year." Another post calls Israel a "76-year-old-crime scene." A third states: "The fight for freedom... is about liberating the world from the grip of Zionism... As for the accusation of rape against Palestinian resistance fighters, I believe these are propaganda."

HRW's coverage of the burial of Shiri Bibas and her two young sons, seized hostage by Hamas and returned in body bags, describing them as having "all died while in custody in Gaza."

Agnes Callamard, Amnesty International secretary-general, retweeting a post in 2021 alluding to Israel assassinating Yasser Arafat, and posting in January 2026 that Israel had been destroying the world order for two years.

The atmosphere has grown more emboldened and more ideological; bias once discreet is now explicit. But much of what's happening is about absence, not presence; what's omitted, not what's said.

It's the delayed Amnesty October 7 report, held for two years and released during a holiday lull because, internal emails show, staff feared generating sympathy for Israel. It's the organisation's refusal to hold mandatory antisemitism trainings; a voluntary session in 2024 focused on defining what antisemitism is not ("false antisemitism") and Israeli illegitimacy.

At MSF, it's the newsletter two years after

October 7 calling for a "March for

Palestine" and marking the day

as the anniversary of Israel's "genocide," with no mention of Hamas, its 1,500 victims, or 250 hostages.

At HRW, it's meetings after October 7, absent mention of Hamas and its terror, and the 14-point action list in which a "micro-video" on hostages and product on "killings in southern Israel" signalled the only planned advocacy related to the largest massacre of Jews since the Holocaust.

Scoops and scandals generate attention. But to understand what's happening inside global human rights NGOs today, we need to connect dots and pay attention to the thousand small silences and distortions that are gradually hollowing them out from within.

We need to mind the gaps.

Danielle Haas was senior editor at Human Rights Watch from 2009-2023, and is a founder of EIGHT, www.eightright.org



Don't mention Hamas: the Nasser Hospital in Gaza