

**MERCY ANGELS: THE JOINT CHURCH AID AND THE  
HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE IN BIAFRA, 1967-1970**

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## **ABSTRACT**

International humanitarian organizations played a prominent role in the Nigeria-Biafra War, but scholars have paid little or no attention to the humanitarian crisis in the war and the global humanitarian intervention that followed it. This thesis aims to fill a gap in the historiography of international humanitarian aid in the Nigeria-Biafra War by focusing on the Joint Church Aid (JCA), a consortium of Catholic and Protestant Churches that provided relief aid for the starving civilians in Biafra. This study of the JCA is broken down into three parts: the humanitarian impulse in the Nigeria-Biafra conflict, the formation of the JCA and its relief organization, and the challenges of relief operation in Biafra. The research provides a window into understanding the complex nature of international humanitarian aid in political conflicts. This dissertation argues that the JCA's humanitarian operation, though relatively successful, had unintended consequences. While the JCA aimed to provide relief for the starving Biafran population, it was interpreted by the Nigerian government as political support for a "rebellion." Convinced that the humanitarian organizations engaged in arms dealings with the Biafran government, the Nigerian government intensified military counter-action against the relief operation. The Nigerian government refused to separate international humanitarian aid from the political objectives of the war hence starvation came to be seen as a legitimate instrument of warfare. On the Biafran side, however, there was an effort to separate international humanitarian aid from the politics and hostilities of the war. Consequently, humanitarianism became a deeply contested issue that brought the humanitarian agencies into direct conflict with the Nigerian government. This study contributes to the

scholarship on international humanitarianism and the internationalization of armed conflicts in postcolonial Africa.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

ACKBA American Committee to keep Biafra Alive

ACT Action by Churches Together

AG Action Group

AJEEBR American Jewish Emergency Effort for Biafran Relief

BBC British Broadcasting Corporation

BCG Bacillus Calmette Guerin

CCB Christian Council of Biafra

CIA Central Intelligence Agency

CRDA Church Relief and Development Association

DDW Das Diakonische Werk

EWG Executive Working Group

FCO Foreign and Commonwealth Office

FMG Federal Military Government

ICRC International Committee of the Red Cross

JCA Joint Church Aid

MSF *Medicins Sans Frontieres*

NAE National Archives Enugu

NAUK National Archives of the United Kingdom

NCA Nordchurchaid

NCNC National Council of Nigeria and Cameroun (later National Council of Nigerian Citizens)

NNA Nigerian National Alliance

NNDP Nigerian National Democratic Party

NPC Northern People's Congress

OAU Organization of African Unity

OXFAM Oxford Committee for Famine Relief

PCCA Presbyterian Church of Canada Archives

SMC Supreme Military Council

SOS Send One Ship

UN United Nations

UNICEF United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund

UPGA United Progressive Grand Alliance

US United States

USAID United States Agency for International Development

USSR Union of Soviet Socialist Republic

WCC World Council of Churches

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

At 6 a.m., May 30, 1967, the Military Governor of Eastern Nigeria, Lt. Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, made a broadcast declaring the Eastern Region with its continental shelf and territorial waters to be an independent state under the name, Republic of Biafra.<sup>1</sup> The secession of Eastern Nigeria had its roots mainly in ethnic and regional animosities between the people of Northern Nigeria and those of Eastern Nigeria.<sup>2</sup> The declaration of the independence of Biafra came after two military coups in January and July 1966 and the subsequent killing of thousands of Eastern Nigerians resident in Northern Nigeria and some parts of Western Nigeria. While the January 15, 1966 coup led mainly by military officers of Eastern Nigeria origin was believed to be a revolution against a corrupt civilian regime, the July 1966 coup was a reprisal attack against people of Eastern Nigeria by Northern Nigerian soldiers. Six weeks after the declaration of Biafra's independence, the war broke out.

Biafra's declaration of independence came after efforts to reconcile the Eastern Region with the Federal Government of Nigeria failed. Neither the famous peace talks in Aburi, Ghana, nor the mediatory efforts of some prominent Nigerians could restore peace and trust between Eastern Nigeria and the Federal Government of Nigeria. Efforts by the British government to promote peaceful negotiation between Eastern Nigeria and the

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<sup>1</sup> Nigeria: The Secession of Eastern Nigeria: Memorandum from the British High Commissioner in Nigeria to the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, July 7, 1967, File National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter NAUK), 25/232.

<sup>2</sup> A Reply to Senator Caso's Enquiry Concerning the Situation in the Nigeria-Biafra War by the US Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations, William B. Nacomber, Jr. July 12, 1968, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria.

federal government also proved ineffective.<sup>3</sup> Commenting on the secession of Eastern Nigeria, the British High Commissioner in Lagos noted at the outbreak of the war that Eastern Nigerians were “grievously shocked by the massacre of their fellow tribesmen in the North.”<sup>4</sup> Biafran leaders presented “Biafra” to the outside world as the “last hope of security to life, to property and the will to exist as ordinary human beings for 14,000,000 people thrown out of Nigeria.”<sup>5</sup> The renowned Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, described “Biafra” as a “state of mind, a mind free from the pattern of the past.”<sup>6</sup> The Federal Government of Nigeria, however, interpreted the declaration of Biafra’s independence as a rebellion<sup>7</sup> and tried to prevent the secession by imposing a blockade on Biafra. In order to quell the “rebellion,” Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon, Nigeria’s Military Head of State, took what he described as a “police action” against Biafra. The “police action” was meant to be a short disciplinary action against “rebellious” Biafra, but it turned out to be the beginning of a thirty-month war that would attract global attention.

The rigorous enforcement of a blockade by the Nigerian military forces had a debilitating effect on the civilian population in Biafra. There was an acute shortage of

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<sup>3</sup> Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs on Possible Blockade and Secession of Eastern Region, May 8, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>4</sup> Nigeria: The Secession of Eastern Nigeria: Memorandum from the British High Commissioner in Lagos to the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, July 7, 1967, File NAUK, 25/232.

<sup>5</sup> Christian Council in Biafra: Biafra’s Rebuttal of Nigeria’s Falsehood in Two Documents Nigerians Circulated During the Conference of the World Council of churches, File Presbyterian Church of Canada Archives (hereafter PCCA) 1973-5005-7-8.

<sup>6</sup> Lloyd Garrison, “Odumegwu Ojukwu is Biafra,” *The New York Times Magazine*, June 22, 1969.

<sup>7</sup> The Biafran Illusion: the Fate and Future of Non-Igbo Peoples in the Eastern States of Nigeria, May 23, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-9-3.

food supply from outside Biafra. The cessation of protein food supply (mainly meat) from Northern Nigeria and fish from the Nordic countries began to damage the health condition of the general population, especially children and nursing mothers. The food crisis was most serious in the Northern Igbo region of Biafra which was cut off from food supply from Northern Nigeria and the relatively richer southern Biafra. The mass movement of about 2 million returnees from Northern Nigeria to Eastern Nigeria partly accounted for the quick exhaustion of the local food supply after the blockade. When the major areas that supplied food to Biafra were overrun by the Nigerian forces, in May 1968, Biafra began facing the prospect of serious starvation. It was at this point that both foreign missionaries in Biafra and the Biafran leaders launched an appeal to the world for food support.

In a bid to attract the sympathy and support of the international community, the Biafran government hired Markpress, a Geneva-based public relations firm for a publicity campaign. Markpress coordinated Biafra's propaganda campaign in Europe and North America. The public relations firm constantly used genocide and religion as its propaganda themes. The Biafran government accused the Nigerian government of waging a religious and genocidal war through starvation.<sup>8</sup> The allegation of using starvation as a legitimate instrument of warfare against the people of Biafra roused deep feelings in many parts of the world. As people followed the course of the war through the mass

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<sup>8</sup> "Genocide Charges: False," *Telegram* November 20, 1968. See also "Full Text of a Speech Delivered by Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe to Biafran Troops," *Biafra Newsletter*, February 25, 1968.

media, horrifying images of starving children elicited sympathy among many television watchers in Europe and North America.

In response to the humanitarian crisis, many religious and humanitarian organizations organized relief supplies for Biafra. The Catholic and Protestant Churches, for example, created the Joint Church Aid (JCA), a consortium of relief agencies to provide emergency aid for Biafra.<sup>9</sup> The organization had its operational base in Sao Tome. The Governor of the Province of Sao Tome and Principe had given approval to the humanitarian organizations to use the airport facility in Sao Tome for the purpose of humanitarian relief operations.<sup>10</sup> It was from this base that the humanitarian supplies were sent into Biafra for further distribution. To ensure smooth distribution of the relief supplies, the JCA operated two distribution networks: the World Council of Churches (WCC), which represented Protestant churches; and *Caritas Internationalis*, which represented the Catholic Church.

This study focuses on the humanitarian crisis in Biafra and the intervention of these international humanitarian organizations. By examining the motivations and responses of the humanitarian agencies in the conflict, this study fills a crucial gap in the literature on the Nigeria-Biafra War. The study also treats the Joint Church Aid as a case study of humanitarian aid in international conflicts. Apart from providing new information on the humanitarian intervention in the conflict, the goal is to offer a new perspective on the interpretation of humanitarian intervention in the Nigeria-Biafra War.

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<sup>9</sup> Other JCA Members: Catholic Relief Services, January 9, 1969, File 1973-5005-7-5.

<sup>10</sup> Nordchurchaid: A Report on Its Operations by the Managing Coordinator, Ingvar Berg, June 10, 1970, File 1973-5005-7-4.

The role of relief agencies in the Nigeria-Biafra War shows how complicated humanitarian intervention can be in a political conflict. Neither the International Committee of the Red Cross nor religious organizations was free from criticisms. The parties involved in the conflict had different views about humanitarian aid. Whereas the Biafran government saw it as a welcome development, the Nigerian government interpreted humanitarian aid as support for a “rebellion.” For the humanitarian agencies, humanitarian aid was seen as necessary to prevent the civilian masses from dying of starvation. The conflicting interpretations and confrontations between the humanitarian organizations and the Nigerian government illustrate the kind of unintended consequences which can arise when humanitarian groups try to assist the victims of violent conflicts.

The JCA encountered many challenges in sending relief supplies to Biafra. The Nigerian government argued that it was impossible to separate humanitarian aid from the political objectives in the war.<sup>11</sup> The Nigerian Air Force constantly harassed the planes that brought relief supplies into the Biafran Airport at Uli. Dispute over what constituted humanitarian aid and attempts by the Nigerian government to stop humanitarian aid reduced the free flow of relief supplies thereby increasing the alarming death rate arising from starvation.

Efforts made by various world governments to bring the Nigerian and Biafran leaders together to work out an agreement on sustaining the humanitarian aid in Biafra failed. Although Britain and the US appeared to take the threat of famine very seriously,

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<sup>11</sup> Visit of the Nigerian Commissioners Ayida and Ebong, July 28, 1969, File Department of State, POL27, Biafra-Nigeria, Airgram.



they could not blame the Nigerian government because they felt that leaders of both Biafra and Nigeria deliberately obstructed humanitarian relief for political reasons.<sup>12</sup>

While the Nigerian government thought it could use starvation to coerce Biafra to surrender, the Biafran government believed the hunger crisis could influence world powers to force the Nigerian government into accepting a peace agreement on Biafran terms.<sup>13</sup>

## **REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

Although there is abundant literature on the Nigeria-Biafra War, most studies have been written by soldiers or administrators who were involved in the conflict. Other relevant accounts on the war have been written by foreign journalists who witnessed the war. Whereas most of the books written by soldiers deal with the military aspect of the war, most of those authored by foreign journalists concentrate on the international dimension of the war. For example, Suzanne Cronje, in her book, *The World and Nigeria*, presented a picture of British dominant control in the war. Britain, according to Cronje, was dishonest in the way it handled issues in the conflict. In Nigeria, Britain led Nigerians to believe that they were winning the war with British bullets but back in

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<sup>12</sup> Public Opinion in Nigerian Civil War, August 6, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>13</sup> Brubeck Calls on Permsecs Ayida and Asiodu, September 18, 1969, Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

Britain, the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, made the case to the British public that Britain was not making any significant contribution to the war.<sup>14</sup>

The historical evidence suggests, however, that British economic interests in Nigeria largely influenced its policies in the conflict.<sup>15</sup> In the pursuit of its interests, Britain regarded Nigeria as a client state. The British preoccupation with the war appeared to have irritated some Nigerian political leaders to the extent that a Nigerian government official wryly remarked that Britain thought Nigeria was still its colony.<sup>16</sup> Nigerian political leaders wanted a united Nigeria for greater economic prosperity. Britain also wanted a peaceful and united Nigeria that would guarantee British economic interests in the huge oil resources in the Biafra region. Cronje noted that both Britain and Russia had the same level of interest in the country but for different reasons and through different approaches. Whereas the British interest was obviously economic, with its huge

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<sup>14</sup> Suzanne Cronje, *The World and Nigeria: the Diplomatic History of the Biafra War 1967-1970* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972), 92. For more information on the soldiers' accounts, see Alexander Madiebo, *Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1986), Oulsegun Obasanjo, *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (London: Heinemann, 1980), Ben Gbulie, *The Fall of Biafra* (Enugu: Benlie, 1990), David Ejoor, *Reminiscences* (Lagos: Malthouse, 1989), Joseph Nanven Garba, "Revolution" in *Nigeria: Another Review* (London: African Journals Limited, 1982), Joe Achuzie, *Requiem Biafra* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1986), H. M. Njoku, *A Tragedy Without Heroes: The Nigeria-Biafra War* (Enugu : Fourth Dimension, 1987), Adewale Ademoyega, *Why We Struck: The Story of the First Nigerian Coup* (Ibadan: Evans, 1981), Olusegun Obasanjo, *Nzeogwu* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 1987) Ben Gbulie, *Nigeria's Five Majors* (Onitsha: Africana Educational Publishers, 1981).

<sup>15</sup> Nigeria: The Secession of Eastern Nigeria: Memorandum from the British High Commissioner in Lagos to the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, July 7, 1967, File NAUK, 25/232. See also Role of Shell/BP in the invasion of the Bonny Island, File NAUK 25/235.

<sup>16</sup> Cronje, *The World*, 114.

investment in Nigeria, Russia which had no previous economic, political or cultural relationship with Nigeria, took the anti-imperialist posture, positioning itself as a supporter of Nigeria's independence and the complete liberation of the continent from the remnants of colonialism.<sup>17</sup>

Cronje observed that British oil interest in Nigeria also influenced its attitude to relief supplies to Biafra. She argued that Britain wanted the International Committee of the Red Cross to suspend humanitarian aid in Biafra until military actions aimed at defeating Biafra were completed.<sup>18</sup> In this regard, Britain and the US shared a similar policy on the humanitarian aid in Biafra.<sup>19</sup> Although the US government shared the same view with Britain on humanitarian relief, public opinion in America still had an impact. The decision of the American government to sell some aircraft to the humanitarian agencies and to increase relief supplies was as a result of American public opinion. While Cronje's views on British and American policies on humanitarian aid are helpful to understanding the international politics of humanitarian aid in Biafra, they do not offer clue as to the motivations and achievements of the humanitarian agencies in the conflict. This is a crucial gap that this study aims to fill.

John de St. Jorre agrees with Cronje on the British economic interest as a factor in British support for a united Nigeria. He noted that Britain was Nigeria's biggest single

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<sup>17</sup> Cronje, *The World*, 261.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

trading partner with fifteen thousand of its nationals in the country.<sup>20</sup> St Jorre also highlighted the influence of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the Arab world and France in the conflict. The OAU's choice of Congo as the venue of the first meeting to deliberate on the crisis, he argued, worked against the interest of Biafra.<sup>21</sup> Although the crisis in Katanga (Congo) did not share the same background with Biafra, it cast a malignant shadow on the dangers of secession movements in Africa.<sup>22</sup> Whereas the Katanga secession was primarily motivated by the presence of huge mineral deposits in the region, that of Biafra was precipitated more by the pressing drive for self-preservation – survival. Moreover, the Katanga secession, unlike Biafra, was partly instigated by the external powers.<sup>23</sup> Conor Cruise O'Brien, a special UN representative to the UN Secretary General at Katanga, argued that the main difference between Katanga and Biafra was that the Biafran secession had “real indigenous roots.”<sup>24</sup>

De St Jorre observed that the interaction between the humanitarian organizations and the Nigerian government generated the greatest controversy and emotion.<sup>25</sup> He stated

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<sup>20</sup> John de St Jorre, *The Brothers' War: Biafra and Nigeria* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972), 294. For more information, see Chibuikwe Uche, “Oil, British Interest and the Nigerian Civil War,” *Journal of African History*, Vol. 49, no.1(2008).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>22</sup> The Katanga secession led by Moise Tshombe was created to frustrate the national independence of Congo under Patrice Lumumba. It was planned and financed by the huge foreign mining companies in that province.

<sup>23</sup> Conor Cruise O'Brien, “A Condemned People,” *The New York Book Review*, Vol. IX, No 11, December 21, 1967. O'Brien, was Ireland's UN Special Representative to Dag Hammarskjold, Secretary General of the United Nations in the Katanga Region of Democratic Republic of the Congo. He strongly opposed the Katanga secession by expelling French and other Western backed mercenaries in Katanga.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> De St Jorre, *The Brothers*, 235

that the 1966 massacres that created over a million refugees in Eastern Nigeria and the war that followed worsened the problem of protein supply in Eastern Nigeria.<sup>26</sup> Although St Jorre recognised the role of humanitarian agencies in the conflict, he was of the view that the activities of these agencies reflected a colonial agenda because they showed a disregard for the sovereignty of the Nigerian nation. The relief agencies, especially the Joint Church Aid, engaged in the relief operation in Biafra without clearance from the Nigerian government. While this view may have some merit, St Jorre failed to pay adequate attention to the principles that drove the churches' humanitarian mission in Biafra. This study seeks to address this limitation by drawing attention to the biblical injunction of "feeding the hungry" as the altruistic force that drove the church groups into humanitarian action in Biafra.

In his analysis of British policy, Frederick Forsyth, one of the prominent journalists that reported on the war, argued that the British interest in Nigeria was not for the good of the people of Nigeria but its economic interest.<sup>27</sup> Forsyth pointed out that only a small group of British politicians, civil servants and businessmen whose ambition was solely imperialistic managed British interest in the conflict.<sup>28</sup> This small group that represented British interest considered the secession of Biafra inimical to British economic interest in Nigeria. This, Forsyth argued, influenced British support for Nigeria.

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 237.

<sup>27</sup> Frederick Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend* (South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Military, 2009), 154.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 154.

Forsyth, whose accounts of the war tend to be pro-Biafran, made a passing but an important reference to the contribution of the American public to the humanitarian action in Biafra. He contended that the actual heroes of the American contribution to humanitarian aid were the unnamed American citizens who burdened the State Department with an avalanche of petitions to support humanitarian aid in Biafra.<sup>29</sup> Forsyth did not go further to discuss the sources of the petitions and how they influenced American policy on the relief aid. Nonetheless, analyzing America's role in the conflict with regard to its policy of "neutrality" has remained contentious. While the United States government claimed to be politically neutral, it still recognised the Nigerian government as the legitimate government in Nigeria and at the same time supported Biafra with humanitarian relief.<sup>30</sup> Owing to the delicate connection between humanitarian and political factors in the war, the United States government decided to channel its humanitarian support through the non-political International Committee of the Red Cross.<sup>31</sup>

Joseph Thompson provided an interesting study of American policy on the war. He pointed out that the US declaration of non-intervention policy in the conflict was a tactic designed by the Department of State to show that the United States government was

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 240-241.

<sup>30</sup> Joseph Palmer 11's Response on the Situation in Biafra, August 19, 1968, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria.

<sup>31</sup> William H. Macomber Jr's Reply to Honourable George H. Fallon on the Situation of Nigeria and the Plight of Biafran People, December 25, 1968, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria.

not taking sides in the conflict.<sup>32</sup> Thompson stated that the neutrality policy continued even when it became obvious that the UK was giving different forms of military aid to the Nigerian government. The United States government's view was that the UK was Nigeria's traditional arms supplier.<sup>33</sup> The US Ambassador to Nigeria, Elbert Matthew, had also convinced the US government that the British support to the Nigerian government would bring the conflict to a quick end.<sup>34</sup>

Thompson asserted that the State Department did not want direct involvement in humanitarian aid to the war victims but propped up the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as a legitimate third party with the assurance that the ICRC would be in full control of American relief to Biafra. The US contribution to the humanitarian aid in Biafra could not reach the war victims because of the American double-faced policy.<sup>35</sup> The US government's decision on relief was that food and other supplies should be used by Nigerian government "if and when the government decided to feed and heal their enemy."<sup>36</sup> It was much later that the US government took a more pragmatic step to send relief to Biafra. Thompson argued that the US State Department was responsible for the ineffectiveness of the US' role in relief delivery to Biafra. Although Thompson's arguments focus on the US government's policy on the conflict, it has helped to throw more light on the ambivalent American attitude towards humanitarian aid in the conflict.

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<sup>32</sup> Joseph Thompson, *American Policy and African Famine: The Nigeria-Biafra War, 1967-1970* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 29.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

Other scholars such as Dan Jacobs agree with Thompson on the deliberate effort to obstruct relief supplies using the International Committee of the Red Cross. Jacobs argued that British choice of using the International Committee of the Red Cross as a medium of sending relief was designed to conceal the fact that it was the Nigerian government that obstructed relief effort.<sup>37</sup>

In his analysis of the international involvement of the war, John Stremlau contended that African leaders felt compelled to support Nigeria for the fear that if Biafra seceded, other African ethnic groups might be inspired to agitate for secession.<sup>38</sup> The fear of the balkanization of independent African states was real among the African leaders. In his speech to the OAU Consultative Mission to Nigeria, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia remarked that the OAU would strongly oppose any attempt at national fragmentation on religious or ethnic grounds.<sup>39</sup> On the strength of this shared feeling among some African leaders, the OAU consultative Mission in Congo (Kinshasa) reaffirmed its adherence to the principle of respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of member states. The fear of balkanization of independent African states along ethnic lines became a popular argument that seemed to have overshadowed the Biafran case for self-determination.

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<sup>37</sup> Dan Jacobs, *The Brutality of Nations* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 6. See also W. A. Ajibola, *Foreign Policy and Public Opinion: A Case Study of the British Foreign Policy over the Nigerian Civil War*, (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1987)

<sup>38</sup> John J. Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 12.

<sup>39</sup> *Report on the OAU Consultative Mission to Nigeria*, (Apapa: Nigerian National Press Limited, 1967), 9.



In addition, Stremlau examined the basis of Nigerian government policy on humanitarian relief. He argued that the Nigerian government deemed it necessary to allow humanitarian relief into Biafra to promote international goodwill and ensure a quick transfer of popular allegiance from Biafra to Nigeria after the war.<sup>40</sup> In his discussion of humanitarian relief, Stremlau focused solely on the International Committee of the Red Cross with little or no attention paid to the church groups that championed and sustained the humanitarian action in Biafra till the end of the war. His study of the war is essentially ambivalent about the various ways the international community reacted to the conflict. One of the aims of this study is to draw attention to the varied and complex nature of international humanitarian engagement in the conflict. The goal is to show how international relief agencies, particularly the coalition of church organizations, the Joint Church Aid (JCA) responded to the humanitarian crisis in Biafra.

In his autobiographical account of the war, General Olusegun Obasanjo, the former Nigerian military Head of State, asserted that if Nigeria had been left alone by external powers, the crisis might not have resulted in a civil war.<sup>41</sup> He contended that without assurance of external moral and material support and recognition, Biafra would not have seceded. This argument is open to challenge. While external powers may have contributed to the outbreak of the conflict, Nigerian political leaders were free in their choice of actions. It is therefore difficult to sustain an argument that blames the outbreak of the conflict entirely or even primarily on external influence. The argument for foreign

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<sup>40</sup> Stremlau, *The International Politics*, 281.

<sup>41</sup> Olusegun Obasanjo, *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (London: Heinemann, 1980), 146.

causes of the war minimises the successive massacres of Eastern Nigerians, which truncated the effort of the Ad Hoc Committee on Constitutional Proposal for the Future of Nigeria to find a lasting solution to the political crisis leading up to the war.<sup>42</sup> The massacres that followed the July 1966 coup, for instance, could hardly be blamed on the foreign countries or their agents. Although Obasanjo's book deals mainly with the activities of the Third Marine Commando unit, which he commanded during the war, he briefly discussed the role of humanitarian aid in the conflict. He acknowledged the efficiency of Biafran propaganda in influencing American support for humanitarian aid in Biafra.<sup>43</sup>

Other participants' accounts of the war have examined the role of humanitarian agencies from a different perspective. According to the Chief Secretary to the Biafran Government, Ntieyong Akpan, the motives of the relief agencies involved in the war were grossly misunderstood by the parties in the conflict.<sup>44</sup> Akpan noted that the International Committee of the Red Cross was criticised heavily among the relief agencies because its relief contribution came from donations made by other countries. Akpan seemed to agree with the Nigerian government's view that humanitarian intervention contributed to the prolongation of the war. He stated, however, that even if the war had ended earlier than it did, without humanitarian intervention more civilian lives would have been lost. Though a cursory reference, Akpan noted that the humanitarian agencies, especially the church

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<sup>42</sup> *Nigeria 1966* (Apapa: Nigerian National Press, 1966), 23.

<sup>43</sup> Obasanjo, *My Command*, 148.

<sup>44</sup> Ntieyong U. Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession, 1966-1970: A Personal Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (London: Frank Cass, 1972), 159.

groups, were altruistic and transparent in their actions, adding that they were simply motivated by the suffering of the civilians.<sup>45</sup>

In order to appreciate the role of international humanitarian agencies in the war, it is important to understand the war-time humanitarian crisis that prompted their intervention. This perspective is provided in Emma Okocha's first-hand account of the war, *Blood on the Niger*.<sup>46</sup> Okocha, who lost his parents in the Asaba massacre, presented a detailed narrative of the events that led to the changes in the social and economic relations between Western Igbos (a part of the Igbo ethnic group in Mid-Western Nigeria) and their neighbours, the damages caused by the war and the unprovoked military attack on the civilian population in Asaba, Ibusa, Ogwashi-Ukwu and Isheagu.<sup>47</sup> Okocha's account reveals more about the mass killings and the "obituary portraits" of some of the prominent people who died in the war. He also discussed the role of the missionaries in the rehabilitation of Asaba and Ibusa, two key towns where the war was fought. At the centre of the reconstruction and rehabilitation programs were the Quaker Services and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID).<sup>48</sup> Personal accounts like this provide useful insights into how ordinary people on both sides of the conflict encountered the humanitarian organizations. These accounts also show that humanitarian action was not restricted to Biafra. The extension of humanitarian aid to the Nigerian side

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>46</sup> Emma Okocha, *Blood on the Niger: The First Black-On-Black Genocide* (New York: Gomslam Books, 2010) Okocha is a survivor-victim of the Asaba "Genocide." He lost his parents to the massacre but was saved by an Irish nun in a Catholic orphanage.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 178.

during the conflict counters the claim that the humanitarian organizations were only lending political support to Biafra.

In his study of the Nigeria-Biafra War, Zdeneck Cervenka has provided an interesting analysis of the humanitarian dimensions of the conflict. Cervenka observed that no issue received as much attention in the war as the human problems of starvation, disease and suffering. The humanitarian aspect of the war, he noted, became intertwined with the military and political issues.<sup>49</sup> Cervenka asserted that both the Federal Military Government of Nigeria and Biafra took advantage of the misery of the suffering civilians for their political ends. Authorities on the Nigerian side saw starvation as a legitimate instrument of war that could force Biafra to surrender to the Nigerian authority, whereas Biafran leaders felt that the horrifying pictures of starving Biafran children that were shown on television could rally international support for the Biafran cause.<sup>50</sup> The argument about the politics of the humanitarian crisis offers a starting premise for this study. Part of the goal of this study is to assess whether the available historical evidence supports this and similar arguments about international humanitarianism during the conflict.

In their study of Canada's role in the war, Brewin and MacDonald explored the ambivalence of the United Nations towards the conflict. They argued that the United Nations and its member nations failed to recognise the conflict as a humanitarian catastrophe and a test of its ability to handle conflicts and peacemaking at the

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<sup>49</sup> Zdeneck Cervenka, *The Nigerian War, 1967-1970* (Frankfurt am Main: Bernard and Graef Fur Wehrwesen, 1971), 153.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

international level.<sup>51</sup> The argument that the conflict was an African problem that should be solved by Africans apparently influenced the UN's policy. As will be evident in the succeeding chapters, my research suggests that the UN's policy on the war was not just influenced by the "African solution to African problem" argument. This dissertation shows that the position of the British government also influenced the UN's position on the conflict. The problem of starvation among children in Biafra only became known in June 1968 when Michael Leapman published his first report in *the Sun*.<sup>52</sup> This newspaper report stirred emotions among the British public and parliamentarians who began to organize relief aid for Biafra. Nickerson noted that frequent media reports about the starving children in Biafra made headlines in Europe and North America. Such reports influenced the opinion of people in Netherlands, Sweden, Britain and France, many of whom volunteered to work with the humanitarian agencies in Biafra. Nickerson further argued that the international community did not pay attention to the seriousness of the humanitarian problem in Biafra until journalists from Europe and North America began reporting on the crisis.<sup>53</sup> Nickerson shares the same view as Dan Jacobs and Joseph Thompson in arguing that the British and Americans collaborated to obstruct humanitarian aid in Biafra. Nickerson asserted that in the months of August and September 1968, the British government and American State Department brought

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<sup>51</sup> Andrew Brewin and David MacDoanald, *Canada and the Biafran Tragedy* (Toronto: James Lewis and Samuel Publishers, 1970), 123.

<sup>52</sup> Betty Nickerson, *Chi: Letters from Biafra* (Toronto: New Toronto Press, 1970), 90.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

“massive political pressure” on the International Committee of the Red Cross not to send any humanitarian aid to Biafra.<sup>54</sup>

Reverend Father Tony Byrne, the Director of Catholic Relief Program to Biafra, was probably the first person to present a general picture of the humanitarian operation in Biafra. In his book, *Airlift to Biafra: Breaching the Blockade*, Byrne, described Biafra as the first mass-starvation of men, women and children to reach the people of Western Europe and North America through television.<sup>55</sup> Television images of children who were reduced to walking skeletons by starvation moved ordinary people to support Biafra. Byrne explored the role of key individuals in the conflict including Count von Rosen, a popular Swedish pilot who left the service of the Joint Church Aid and started supporting Biafra. Rosen, according to Byrne, likened the Biafran experience to that of the German Jews.<sup>56</sup> According to Byrne, Rosen saw the Nigeria-Biafra War as a repeat of history in which Nigerians were the Nazis while Biafrans were the Jews. By interpreting the conflict as genocide, Rosen concluded that the only way to stop the atrocity was to support Biafrans to win the war.<sup>57</sup> Byrne’s account does not pay adequate attention to the Protestants’ participation in the humanitarian operation. As a memoir, however, Byrne may not have set out to write the whole history of the Joint Church Aid. This might explain why he seemed to have focused more on the Catholic Church’s involvement in

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>55</sup> Tony Byrne, *Airlift to Biafra: Breaching the Blockade* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1997), 7.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 128

the humanitarian aid. Nevertheless, his book is a significant contribution to the literature on humanitarian intervention in the conflict.

In a recently published comprehensive multi-authored study on the war, Chima Korieh argued that the Biafran genocide has been mischaracterised by scholars of Nigerian history as a civil war.<sup>58</sup> He described the mass-killing of Igbos as a carefully planned and executed political project aimed at exterminating the Igbo ethnic group in Northern Nigeria and other parts of the country.<sup>59</sup> For Korieh, the series of pogroms and the war was a way of dealing with what he called the “Igbo problem.”<sup>60</sup> He also noted the mass death arising from starvation as one of the tragedies of the war. Korieh’s book is a significant contribution in the historiography of the war because it is the first attempt to present the Biafran genocide from the Biafran perspective. Presenting an account of the war from a Biafran perspective also appears to be the goal of *There Was a Country* by Chinua Achebe. Achebe argued that the Biafran secession was inevitable.<sup>61</sup> For him, Nigeria was no longer habitable for the Igbo and many people from Eastern Nigeria. He noted that the Nigerian government did nothing to stop the massacre of Easterners. The inability of the Nigerian government to safeguard the lives and property of Easterners led them to conclude that they had to seek safety by other means including secession.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Chima J. Korieh, “Introduction: History and the Politics of Memory” in Chima J. Korieh ed., *The Nigeria-Biafra War: Genocide and the Politics of Memory* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2012), 3.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>61</sup> Chinua Achebe, *There Was a Country*, (London: Penguin, 2012), 125.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

Achebe shares the same view with Chima Korieh on the Nigerian government perpetration of genocide against Biafra. He argued that the Nigerian government deliberately employed hunger as an instrument of warfare and noted that the blockade of Biafra brought starvation, which greatly affected children.<sup>63</sup> His argument has generated more controversy than any other issue in the war's history. The controversy stems partly from the fact that some critiques have characterized Achebe's arguments as tinged with ethnic bias and not adequately backed with documentary evidence.<sup>64</sup> Nonetheless, the book has helped to generate academic and popular debates about the genocide that seemed to have been forgotten in the historiography of the Nigeria-Biafra War.

In summary, a review of literature on the Nigeria-Biafra War shows a paucity of scholarship on the war. This has led to an uneven body of literature wherein various important questions, including the issue of humanitarian aid have been explored. The Biafran famine and the international humanitarian operation have not been fully explored despite the description of the humanitarian crisis at the time of the conflict as “one of the world's most urgent problems.”<sup>65</sup> Most scholars of the war still treat the humanitarian aspects of the war as a footnote, making it appear less important among other issues of interest in the conflict. With the notable exception of Joseph Thomson's, *American Policy and African Famine* which focuses mainly on American policy on the humanitarian aid and Reverend Tony Byrne's *Airlift to Biafra*, other studies mention the international

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 199.

<sup>64</sup> Pini Jason, Review of *There Was a Country* by Chinua Achebe, *The Vanguard*, October 30, 2012.

<sup>65</sup> “Biafra: A Turn in the Situation? *Neue Zurcher Zeitung*, November 5, 1969.



humanitarian operation only in passing. As a consequence of this, the motivations and role of the world churches from thirty three countries of the world remain virtually unexplored and therefore, not well represented. It is important to note, however, that humanitarian studies as an area of interest in history or related disciplines is still emerging. The increase of conflicts in different parts of the developing world has opened humanitarian aid studies as a new frontier in historical scholarship.

Another important theme that is central to this study is the question of religion. Religion played a crucial role in the Nigeria-Biafra conflict and the unprecedented international humanitarian intervention that it unleashed. Religious considerations shaped the actions of both the warring parties and the religious organizations that became involved in the conflict. Although the Nigerian government constantly denied that the war was a religious conflict, many individuals and groups in Europe, North America, Biafra and Nigeria saw the conflict as a religious war between the “Muslim North” and the “Christian Biafra.” Discourses on the conflict, the missionaries’ publicity and the global response of the churches animated and underpinned this notion. This research explores the interconnection between starvation, humanitarian aid and religious identities in the conflict.

## **OBJECTIVE**

Given the identified gaps in the study of the humanitarian agencies in the war, my research explores the motivations and the roles of the humanitarian organizations in

Biafra. It also examines the complex nature of the engagement of the humanitarian agencies and how their actions were perceived by the warring parties. Owing to the limitations of space and scope, it was not possible to examine all the humanitarian organizations that participated in the humanitarian action in Biafra. To keep the discussion within certain limits, this study focuses primarily on the church organizations that operated under the auspices of the Joint Church Aid (a composite of Catholic and Protestant Churches). The Joint Church Aid (JCA) serves as an important case study of humanitarian aid because it remained active until the end of the war. Although the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) was initially a major player in providing humanitarian service, it withdrew from the country after one of its relief planes was shot down by the Nigerian Air Force on June 5, 1969.

The international humanitarian aid in Biafra is examined from three perspectives: the humanitarian impulse, the role of the JAC and the challenges of relief operation. This is not an impact study of the role of the humanitarian agencies. It does not intend to show how humanitarian action affected the war victims or the conflict in general. Instead, it focuses on the factors that influenced the intervention of the humanitarian organizations and how such intervention shaped the interpretations of the war debate.

## **SIGNIFICANCE**

This study explores the important but largely ignored humanitarian dimensions of the Nigeria-Biafra War, a conflict that has been described as one of the most significant

global humanitarian crisis in the post-Second World War era.<sup>66</sup> A team of nutritionists and agricultural experts who in the past had studied famine throughout the world reported in February 1969 that a million and a half civilians had died of starvation and other related causes in Biafra.<sup>67</sup> Since February 1969, reports from other experts show that a million more died as a result of starvation, bringing the number of civilian deaths to two and a half million.<sup>68</sup> Most of these victims were children and women. It was this high mortality rate among the civilian population in Biafra that made the US president, Lyndon Johnson, in his letter to Emperor Haile Selassie on August 5, 1968, to describe the humanitarian crisis as one of the “basic obligations of common humanity.”<sup>69</sup> This study provides a unique insight into the motivations that drove the global humanitarian aid and the patterns of intervention. It also highlights how the individuals who served as humanitarians in Biafra perceived and understood the conflict and their roles within it.

This study shows that humanitarian action in the conflict was a very delicate subject, highly contested and easily misconstrued. Although the humanitarian aid in Biafra may have been well-intentioned, it produced unintended consequences. Beyond that, the study contributes to advancing our understanding of local perceptions of

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<sup>66</sup> “Biafra: A Turn in the Situation,” Translation from *Neue Zurcher Zeitung*, November 5, 1969.

<sup>67</sup> *Relief Problems in Nigeria-Biafra: Hearings before the Subcommittee to Investigate Problems Connected with Refugees and Escapees of the Committee on the Judiciary United States Senate, Ninety-First Congress, Second Session, January 21-22, 1970* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1970), 169.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> A text of Statement by the Honourable Joseph Palmer II, Assistant Secretary of State African Affairs, Washington D. C. Before the African Sub-Committee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Washington D. C., September 11, 1968.

international engagement in civil conflicts and how such perceptions shape the outcome of conflicts. This study is particularly relevant to our understanding of post-colonial conflicts in Africa and elsewhere in the developing world where many international organizations have continued to play major roles as humanitarian agencies.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study is based on archival research conducted in Nigeria, Britain, Canada and the United States of America. Many of these sources have been largely neglected or underutilized by scholars. At the National Archives of the United Kingdom, I consulted Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) files. Documents in the FCO files provided valuable information on how the Biafran propaganda influenced international humanitarian intervention in the conflict. The National Archives Enugu, Nigeria, helped provide background information on the events that led up to the conflict. Files such as Catholic Relief Services were particularly useful in dealing with the role of *Caritas Internationalis* in the humanitarian operation. The Presbyterian Church of Canada Archive was useful in my study of the role of the Joint Church Aid as a humanitarian organization. The JCA files opened a lot of information that seem to have been neglected. The US State Department files covered different aspects of the war and were relevant in dealing with the relief debates. A careful study of documents from these various sources helped me to understand the views of various different groups in the conflict.

In addition, I conducted oral interviews with some Biafran War veterans and actors in the humanitarian operation in Biafra. I had the privilege of interviewing some

Canadians who served as administrators for the humanitarian organizations in Biafra. For example, Ron McGraw, who served as World Council of Churches relief administrator in Biafra gave a detailed account of the JCA's humanitarian relief operation in Biafra. McGraw's firsthand account revealed a great deal about the motivations of the individual humanitarian workers in the conflict. I also looked at a large number of newspaper articles published during the war, particularly to get insights into the domestic and international views on the humanitarian crisis. Newspapers such as *the Biafra Newsletter*, *the Daily Sketch* and *the New Nigeria* provided domestic perspectives while newspapers and magazines such as *the Times*, *the New York Times*, *the Catholic Herald*, *the Washington Post*, *West Africa*, *the Irish Times* and *Observer* provided perspectives on the international front. Information from secondary sources including scholarly books and published first-hand accounts provided the foundations for in-depth archival research. Secondary sources also offered information on key scholarly debates on the history of the war which I subsequently evaluated and analyzed in my research.

This study has been organized both thematically and chronologically to cover events that took place between 1967 and 1970. Although the second chapter begins with colonial policy before 1966, the focus is on events that took place between 1967 and 1970. It basically deals with events that led up to the outbreak of the war. This background information is important because it provides insights into critical and underlying issues that are necessary to understand the conflict. Some of the issues raised in this chapter also formed part of the debate among individual actors in the conflict and humanitarian agencies. Chapter three focuses on the motivation for humanitarian aid. It

examines the role of Christian missionaries in Biafra, Markpress, the Jewish community and the common citizens in Europe and North America in setting the trend for global humanitarian support for Biafra. This initial effort to bring relief supplies to the war victims in Biafra led to the formation of the Joint Church Aid (JCA), which is the main focus of this study. Chapter four concentrates on the formation and role of the Joint Church Aid in bringing relief to the civilian masses in Biafra. The fifth chapter concerns itself with the challenges that confronted the humanitarian organizations in the course of their humanitarian operation in Biafra. It also examines the role of the JCA as a humanitarian organization. The sixth chapter is the conclusion.

## **CHAPTER 2: THE WAR**

This chapter explores the factors that laid the foundation for the outbreak of the Biafra War. It examines colonial and postcolonial factors. The colonial period began in 1914 when Nigeria was created by Britain and ended in 1960 when Nigeria gained its independence. The colonial factors include the amalgamation of Nigeria in 1914, the problems of the 1946 Constitution and the 1953 parliamentary crisis. The postcolonial factors focus on issues such as the census and election crises, the 1966 coups, the Ironsi regime, the Gowon regime and the September/October 1966 massacre, the Aburi Accord implementation, the state creation and secession, and the “police action.” This chapter is intended to set out the background to the issues that gave rise to the conflict. This is relevant to the study because subsequent chapters make reference to these issues as the warring parties hinged their arguments on them.

### **COLONIAL POLICY**

No issue in Nigerian political history has generated as much debate as the Nigeria-Biafra War,<sup>1</sup> which began in 1967 and ended in 1970. Scholars of Nigerian history have wondered why Nigeria, soon after independence in 1960, plunged into a horrendous war. Some scholars and witnesses of the Biafra War have focused primarily on postcolonial

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<sup>1</sup> Different scholars describe the war in different ways. While some describe it as the Nigerian civil war, others prefer to call it the Nigeria-Biafra War. Yet, some like to describe it as the Biafra War. For the purpose of this study, Nigeria-Biafra War will be used. I have chosen Nigeria-Biafra War because Biafra declared its independence before the outbreak of the war and was recognised by some countries until its capitulation in 1970.

events as explanation for the conflict, giving little attention to the colonial background of the country. Although postcolonial events sparked the conflict, colonial policies, to a large extent, laid the foundation of much of the war. It is therefore necessary to critically examine the causes of the Biafra War under the rubric of colonial and postcolonial factors. Whereas the colonial factors can be considered as the remote causes of the conflict, the postcolonial events can be seen as the immediate causes.

Until 1914, there was no Nigeria. The creation of Nigeria in 1914 was part of the British effort to build a global empire for commercial, strategic and prestige reasons. Lord Frederick Lugard, the first Governor General of colonial Nigeria, under the direction of Lord Harcourt, then Secretary of State for Colonies, merged the Northern and Southern protectorates to form what is today known as Nigeria. Thus, the amalgamation of 1914 is arguably the most significant event in the colonial history of Nigeria. Many Nigerians have blamed Nigeria's political problems on Lord Lugard for bringing together ethnically and religiously fragmented groups to form a union. It is important to note that the amalgamation policy was actually initiated by Harcourt and handed down to Lugard for implementation.

On June 17, 1913, Lord Harcourt, made a momentous speech that would later shape and determine the destiny of the diverse peoples that would see themselves as Nigerians. In that speech, Harcourt said, "We have released Northern Nigeria from the leading strings of the Treasury. The promising and well conducted youth....is about to effect an



alliance with a Southern Lady of Means... May the Union be Fruitful.<sup>2</sup> The “Southern Lady of Means” represented the resource-rich Southern Protectorate. By this speech, Harcourt authorized Lugard to carry out a colonial experiment that would give birth to the most populous black African country in the world. The amalgamation was a marriage of convenience borne out of economic expediency. Northern Nigeria had been subsisting on a subsidy from Southern Nigeria and an annual Imperial Grant-in-Aid of about £300,000 from Britain.<sup>3</sup> The burden of financing the Northern administration was therefore transferred to Southern Nigeria, then Southern Protectorate.

One of the major problems with the colonial creation was that Britain still maintained different administrative policies in the Northern and Southern protectorates, a policy that produced tenuous bonds among the ethnic groups that formed the union. As such, Nigerians did not undergo the same colonial experience. Rather than narrowing the differences among the peoples that make up Nigeria, colonial rule widened them. The British colonial policy allowed Southern peoples unrestrained access to Western education and Christianity, while in the North, Britain deliberately preserved the Muslim culture and put in place policies that inhibited the penetration of missionaries. In his effort to maintain the loyalty of Northern leaders, Governor Lugard shielded Northern Nigeria from the influence of Western education and promised the Northern emirs that the missionaries would not be allowed to enter their emirates without their approval.<sup>4</sup> The implication of this policy would be felt during the struggle for independence, a situation

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<sup>2</sup> A. H. M Kirk-Green, *Lugard and the Amalgamation of Nigeria: A Documentary Record* (London: Frank Cass and Co Ltd, 1968).

<sup>3</sup> Michael Crowder, *The Story of Nigeria*, (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), 196.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

that would warrant Ahmadu Bello (later Premier of Northern Nigeria) to refer to the 1914 amalgamation as a mistake.<sup>5</sup>

The 1914 amalgamation succeeded in creating a state and not a nation. To this day, the persistent differences among the groups that make up the country have led some Nigerian leaders to assert that Nigeria is not yet a nation.<sup>6</sup> In this context, a state can be defined as “an autonomous public institution of coercion and extraction within a recognized territory.”<sup>7</sup> It is a political and legal union. Although the term remains contested among scholars, “nation” can be defined as “a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and memories, a mass, public culture, a single economy and common rights and duties for all members.”<sup>8</sup> Since the various groups that make up Nigeria as an entity do not share common features such as historic territory, public culture and common myths and memories, some people question its claim to nationhood. Obafemi Awolowo, a prominent leader from the Western Region, stated in 1968 that Nigeria was composed not only of ethnic groups but of three great nations.<sup>9</sup> Awolowo’s idea of “three great nations” is still problematic because Nigeria is made up of over ten big ethnic groups with geographical, historical and cultural differences. He was probably contemplating the possibility of forming three great nations either from the three most populous ethnic groups or the erstwhile colonial regions. It was on the basis of

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<sup>5</sup> Ahmadu Bello, *My Life* (Cambridge: University Press, 1962), 133.

<sup>6</sup> “David-West: A Man of Many Talents,” *Daily Sun*, Tuesday, October 25, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Anthony D. Smith, “The Nation: Real or Imagined?” in Edward Mortimer and Robert Fine eds., *People, Nation and State: The Meaning of Ethnicity and Nationalism* (London: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1999), 38.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Walter Schwarz, “The Next Escalation,” File National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter NAUK), FCO 65/446.

the large size of the country and cultural differences that commentators like Walter Schwarz, one of the journalists who reported on the war, argued that Nigeria should ideally become a confederation of federations – a tripartite union of three big federations which should be able to allow its own minorities autonomy in their own states.<sup>10</sup> For Schwarz, African leaders’ obsession with the disintegration of African states as a result of Biafran secession was unnecessary because other African states did not have a “potential Biafra.”<sup>11</sup> Commenting on the dysfunctional structure of the Nigerian state, Winston S. Churchill observed that Britain “invented” the artificial boundary of Nigeria while Nigerians themselves were the ones trying to create a nation.<sup>12</sup> Margery Perham, a prominent historian of colonial Nigeria, argued that the overwhelming size of the Northern Region and the incompatibility of the Hausa and Igbo ways of life prevented Nigeria from achieving unity.<sup>13</sup>

If amalgamation sowed the seeds of future difficulties, it was Richard’s Constitution of 1946 (Arthur Richard was a Governor General from 1943 to 1948 in colonial Nigeria), which established three regions that exacerbated matters. The problem with this constitutional improvement from the preceding constitution adopted under Governor Hugh Clifford in 1922 was not just the creation of regional councils for the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Winston S. Churchill, “Can the Nigerian Crisis have a Military Solution? March 6, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 65/446. Winston S. Churchill was the grandson of former British Prime Minister and a journalist of some note. He was named after his grandfather.

<sup>13</sup> Memorandum from the British Embassy in France to West African Department on Pro-Biafran Propaganda in France, December 10, 1968, NAUK, FCO 26/229. Margery Perham, the author of *Native Administration in Nigeria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1937), was commissioned by the British Government to write a rejoinder to Frances Debre’s book, which blamed the Nigerian crisis on faulty British colonial policy.

North, East and West, but the inherent structural imbalance. The relationship between the colonial authorities and the leaders of Eastern and Western Nigeria was tenuous, hence the colonial authorities deliberately designed the North to be greater than the two other regions - East and West combined in order to ensure the dominance of the North in the future politics of Nigeria.<sup>14</sup> Again, the three regions mainly represented the three major ethnic groups without giving consideration to the minority ethnic groups. This design created a centrifugal force that pulled the regions apart rather uniting them. Political leaders in the various regions had no common national vision. They only regarded members of their ethnic groups and regions as people who must unite to fight political battles for ethnic and regional gains.<sup>15</sup>

Although the regionalization of the country may have been needed to take care of the ethnic and developmental differences between the North and South, it succeeded in creating a permanent dividing line in terms of the development of the country. This unwieldy structure created a weak centre and strong regions rather than a strong centre and weak regions. The regions became so powerful that some party leaders preferred sending their subordinates to the centre while they remained at the region. For instance, Ahamadu Bello, the Northern People's Congress (NPC) party leader sent his subordinate, Tafawa Balewa to the centre as Prime Minister between 1960 and 1966 while he took up the "inferior" position of Premier whereas his fellow party leaders like Obafemi

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<sup>14</sup> Understanding the Nigerian Crisis, (A Midwestern Nigerian Publication) Department of Internal Affairs and Information, Benin City, 1968, 4-5, File Unclassified Document, National Archives Enugu (hereafter NAE). For more information, see Suzanne Cronje, *The World and Nigeria: The Diplomatic History of the Biafran War 1967-1970* (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1972), 7-9.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Awolowo and Nnamdi Azikiwe took positions in the central government. This structural imbalance in the old federation created room for political conflicts, agitation for state creation and the tendency for one region to dominate the rest of the federation.<sup>16</sup>

One of the major by-products of this structure was the legitimization of ethnic politics as political parties came to be regionally based with ethnic orientations. Thus, the National Council of Nigeria and Cameroun (NCNC) (later renamed the National Council of Nigerian Citizens after independence) became an Eastern (predominantly Igbo) party because its leader was an Igbo; Action Group (AG) in the West was seen as representing the Yoruba interest. The Northern People's Congress (NPC) had an overwhelming influence in the Northern part of the country and came to be seen as a Northern party (predominantly Hausa-Fulani). Consequently, ethnic politics and regional rivalries became dominant features in Nigerian politics and frustrated attempts at nation-building. At this point, religion played little or no role in the political equation.

A related development was the parliamentary clash between the North and the South in 1953 over the target date for securing self-government. The political disagreement was triggered by a controversial motion for "Self-Government in 1956" in the House of Representatives which was strongly opposed by the North.<sup>17</sup> While the Southern political leaders considered the Southern Region ready for self-rule, the Northern political leaders were not ready and refused to be stampeded into a "premature" self-government. This motion was moved by Chief Anthony Enahoro, then a backbencher

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> January 15: Before and After the 1966 Nigerian Crisis Vol. 7, File NAE, GP/X5. This was an official publication of the Eastern Regional Government which represented its position on the conflict.

of the Action Group. The National Council of Nigeria and Cameroons (NCNC), however, supported the motion as it was in line with its vision of achieving self-government at the earliest possible date.<sup>18</sup> The debate over the date for self-rule was tense and polarizing.<sup>19</sup> During the debate Ahmadu Bello commented: “The mistake of 1914 has come to light and I should like to go no further.”<sup>20</sup>

Both the Action Group and the NCNC denounced the North in stinging terms for its opposition to immediate self-government. The interpretation of this legislative disagreement among the Southern people suggests that the Northern leaders might have been influenced by the British colonial authorities to delay the independence date. Bello commented on the true picture when he wrote: “We were very conscious indeed that the Northern Region was far behind others educationally... we simply had not got the numbers they had, nor had we people with the university degrees necessary as a qualification, at that time for some of the higher posts.”<sup>21</sup> Lamenting this inadequacy, Bello further stated, “If the British Administration had failed to give us the even development we deserved and for which we craved so much... what had we to hope from an African administration, probably in the hands of a hostile party?”<sup>22</sup> Ibrahim Imam, a onetime secretary of the NPC also remarked, “When some parts of the Northern Region have not got the word “self-government” in their political vocabulary, we may well need

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Bello, *My Life*, 124. Usman dan Fodio led the 1804 jihad which resulted in the establishment of the Sokoto Caliphate. He was Ahmadu Bello’s great-great-grandfather. See *My Life*. There was no direct connection between Usman dan Fodio in the discussion, a situation that might have provoked Ahmadu Bello.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 111.

time and opportunity to educate the members of the public in their civic and political responsibility.”<sup>23</sup> The attitude of the Northern leaders to the independence struggle reveals a perception of a gap in development between the South and the North, a disparity that would ultimately affect the future political development of the country.

Northern leaders seemed not to have been particularly opposed to the idea of self-government; they were more concerned about the choice of date. They were politically and educationally unprepared to compete with the Southern leaders, who were more advanced in educational attainment and political sophistication. To the Northern leaders, early independence was tantamount to an invitation to commit political suicide.<sup>24</sup> They felt that early political independence would not give them equal opportunity in national politics and would worsen their economic development.

The debate on Nigeria’s independence date not only created a rift between the Northern and Southern leaders, but also left an unpleasant memory among the Northerners who waited for an opportunity to gain revenge. The opening came with the proposed visit to the Northern City of Kano by the Action Group delegation led by S. L. Akintola (a Yoruba and future premier of Western Region). On May 14, 1953, Inua Wada, the then Secretary of the Kano Branch of the Northern People’s Congress (NPC) convened a meeting during which he made a provocative speech against the proposed visit of the AG delegation. Wada stated that Northerners were determined to retaliate the

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 119.

treatment given them in the South, adding that they had organized 1,000 men for the operation.<sup>25</sup>

On the following day, May 15, 1953, there was a procession of the NPC members in Kano designed to stir up supporters and sympathizers to the on-coming event.<sup>26</sup> The procession attracted the support of many Northerners including non-party members. On May 16, the massacre began, despite the fact that the AG delegation had been banned from coming to Kano. The protesters shouted, “We do not want the Yorubas here” while they targeted the Easterners in Kano for attack. In his autobiography, the Premier of the Northern Region, Ahmadu Bello, stated that the fighting took place between Hausas and Igbos, while the Yoruba were surprisingly left out.<sup>27</sup> Bello did not explain why the Igbo became victims of the revenge.

### **DEVELOPMENTS IN THE POSTINDEPENDENCE PERIOD**

The structural weakness of the federal system was manifested more clearly in the 1962/63 census controversy. The population of a region determined the number of seats and power such a region wielded in the federal parliament. The 1952 census conducted by the colonial authorities gave numerical advantage to the Northern Region. The Northern Region had a total population figure of 16.8 million, the East Region 7.2 million while the Western Region was reckoned at 6.4 million ( West 4.6 million, Mid-West 1.5million and

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<sup>25</sup> *Report on the Kano Disturbances, May 16, 17, 18, 19 1953* (Kaduna, Government Printer, 1953), Appendix B, 46.

<sup>26</sup> January 15: Before and After the 1966 Nigerian Crisis Vol. 7, File NAE, GP/X5, January 15, 3.

<sup>27</sup> Bello, *My Life*, 136-137.



Lagos 0.3 million).<sup>28</sup> The Southern political leaders had waited until 1962 to correct what they felt was an anomaly in the 1952 Census. The 1962 census was to be the first comprehensive census ever held in Nigeria, but the total results were never published. J.J. Warren, a British civil servant who was in charge of the census, dismissed the Southern figures of the 1962 census, especially those of the Eastern Region, alleging that they were “false and inflated.”<sup>29</sup> When Warren’s contract expired, Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa took over the conduct of the census. When the figures of the revised 1963 census were released, the North had a total figure of 29.8 million, claiming a 77 per cent increase since the 1952-53 count while the East, with 12.4 million claimed a 72 per cent increase. The West together with the new Mid-West region appeared to have more than doubled itself by getting a total of 13.5 million. These results were rejected by the Premier of the Eastern Region, Michael Okpara, who described the figures as being worse than useless.<sup>30</sup> Okpara alleged irregularities based on the reports of the Eastern inspectors. Ahmadu Bello accepted the result and countered the allegation of inflation by the Eastern leaders. The Mid-Western Region joined the East in rejecting the figure. S. L. Akintola, who was the Premier of the Western Region and also owed his allegiance to the Federal government, accepted the figures while his NCNC ministers who were in coalition with him rejected the figure. This strain broke the coalition in the West. The Premier of Eastern Region who went to court to challenge the figures lost out as the suit was dismissed. An official of the British High Commission in Lagos, however, admitted

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<sup>28</sup> Walter Schwarz, *Nigeria* (London: Pall Mall Press, 1968), 163.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

that the 1963 census figures were “grossly inaccurate” and had been manipulated for political reasons.<sup>31</sup> The census controversy strengthened inter-regional rivalry, especially between the Easterners and the Northerners.

The 1964 Federal Elections proved to be another test for the political unity of Nigeria. The political equation kept changing as new alliances were formed. NCNC came into alliance with the opposition AG to form United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA) while the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP) led by S. L. Akintola allied itself with the NPC to form the Nigerian National Alliance (NNA). The federal election was therefore between UPGA and NNA. These coalitions – UPGA and NNA – had little or no ideological slant. They were solely formed to achieve political victories. Political parties used different measures to outmaneuver their opponents in order to control the national government. The situation became so alarming that Azikiwe issued a warning that if politicians had decided to compromise the national unity, “then they should summon a roundtable conference to decide how national assets should be divided before they seal their doom by satisfying lust for office.”<sup>32</sup> UPGA boycotted the election based on the fear that NNA was planning to rig the election. NNA still went ahead with the election and won many parliamentary seats. For several days after the election, there was a political impasse as the president of the country could not appoint a Prime Minister to form a new government. Though a ceremonial head, the president alone had the constitutional power to call on the Prime Minister to form a new government. With

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<sup>31</sup> Nigeria: Two Military Governors: Memorandum from the British High Commission in Nigeria to the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, April 4, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>32</sup> Schwarz, *Nigeria*, 168.

tension mounting, the country headed towards anarchy and disintegration. On January 4, Nnamdi Azikiwe, the President, in a national broadcast, announced what he described as the formation of a “broadly based national government” to ensure the unity and continuity of the federation.<sup>33</sup> It was a coalition involving the Northern People’s Congress, National Council of Nigerian Citizen and Nigerian National Democratic Party. The Action Group, an unflinching opposition party to NPC was not included in the “broadly based national government.”

Another electoral crisis manifested in the 1965 Western Region election. The election was marred by different forms of violence including vote-rigging, thuggery, murder, arson and intimidation. S. L. Akintola, described by one scholar as the “high priest of election rigging,”<sup>34</sup> rigged the regional election to the advantage of his party, the NNDP, to the chagrin of many Westerners who voted against the party. Violence subsequently broke out in protest with more killing and arson, earning the region the description, “wild West of Nigeria.” The opposition party, AG, published its own result and formed a rival government.

Amidst the violence and political impasse in the Western Region, the “Tiv crisis” broke out in 1964. The Tiv crisis arose from agitation for a separate region from the North to be known as the Middle Belt Region.<sup>35</sup> The Prime Minister’s inability to provide solutions to these mounting problems partly accounted for the military intervention in the governance of the country. To compound these political crises, the nation was confronted

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 199

<sup>35</sup> Bello, *My Life*, 215-216.

with an economic crisis resulting in a hyperinflation. Life became very difficult for the ordinary people while the elite and affluent politicians enjoyed flamboyant living. The military leaders saw this irresponsiveness to the country's political and economic problems as a national crisis that had to be addressed. In January 1966 a group of military officers staged a coup d'état that set in motion the sequence of events that drove the country into war.

### **THE 1966 COUP**

The January 15 1966 coup d'état is perhaps the fulcrum on which argument about the cause of the Nigeria-Biafra War hinges. The civilian government led by Abubakar Tafawa Balewa was overthrown, and a military regime under the leadership of Major General J. T. U Aguiyi Ironsi was instituted. The majority of the military officers who plotted the coup were Igbos by ethnic origin, and the victims of the coup were mostly military and political leaders from the Northern Region. Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, the Prime Minister of Nigeria and Ahmadu Bello, the Premier of the Northern Region were among the Northern leaders murdered in the coup.<sup>36</sup> Military officers of Northern origin that lost their lives included Brigadier Z. Maimalari, Col. Kur Mohammed, Lt. Col. J. Y. Pam and Lt. Col. A. Largema. Other top military officers murdered were from other regions. The Western Region lost its Premier, S. L. Akintola and a few top military officers while the Eastern Region lost only one military officer, Lt. Col. Unegbe, and no

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<sup>36</sup> Ahmadu Bello was the leader of Northern People's Congress (NPC) party, and he wielded more political power and influence than anybody in the North. He personally chose Abubakar Tafawa Balewa to head the national government as Prime Minister while he remained in the Region as Premier.

political leader. It therefore did not go unnoticed that the coup was not carried out in the East.

This skewed distribution in the killing of political leaders and military officers resulted in a growing suspicion among many Nigerians, especially in the North, that the Igbo were planning to take over the leadership of the country.<sup>37</sup> Given that the majority of the coup plotters were Easterners and an Igbo had emerged as the head of state after the coup, it was interpreted in the North as an Igbo coup against the North. Although the coup received wide acclamation, some Northerners saw it as a deliberate attempt to wipe out the Northern political class to allow the Igbo to dominate the national politics. A. M. Mainasara, a Northerner, strongly argued that the redemption of the country as claimed by the conspirators was not the main aim of the plotters. The purpose of the coup, according to him, was to “prevent a section of the country, the North, from effective participation in the governance of the country.”<sup>38</sup> D. J. M. Muffet, who claimed to have had a close relationship with the late Premier, Ahmadu Bello, noted that the perception of the educated Moslem, senior and middle grade civil servants was that the coup was an Igbo plot to take over the country but not an “Army” attempt. In his analysis of the Northern perception, the soldiers had only served as agents of the Igbo clique headed by Nnamdi Azikiwe who was the president of Nigeria until the military coup.<sup>39</sup>

Accounts rendered by some of the January 15, 1966 coup plotters, however, suggest otherwise. Adewale Ademoyega, the only survivor of the five majors that plotted

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<sup>37</sup> Nigeria: Debate, August 22, 1968 NAUK, FCO 38/211.

<sup>38</sup> A.M. Mainasara, *The Five Majors: Why They Struck* (Zaria: Hudahuda Publishing Company, 1982), 9.

<sup>39</sup> D.J.M. Muffett, *Let Truth be Told* (Zaria: Hudahuda Publishing Company, 1982), 79.

and executed the coup, argued that it was not their plan to single out any particular ethnic group for elimination, stressing that they intended that the coup should be national so as to receive nationwide acclamation.<sup>40</sup> Ademoyega's argument addresses the issue of ethnic chauvinism that is alleged to have informed the conspiracy. Ademoyega further pointed out that the propaganda that followed the coup had been possible because of the "non-revolutionary principles" of the Military Head of State, Major General Ironsi. He argued that Ironsi deviated from the well planned government the coup plotters had envisioned.<sup>41</sup> He also noted that Nigeria had been on the brink of disintegration and only the use of force could save it from drifting into total anarchy. In his account, Joseph Garba, a military officer from Northern Nigeria, agrees that the military had an obligation to save the country from anarchy but faulted the idea of killing its talented officers as part of the solution.<sup>42</sup>

According to Major Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu, the leader of the January 15 coup, "The aim of the Revolutionary Council is to establish a strong, united and prosperous nation, free from corruption and internal strife."<sup>43</sup> This suggests that the "revolutionaries" did not have any ethnic prejudice. However, the accounts of other military officers, such as Alexander Madiebo, present a different picture. Although Madiebo did not participate in the coup, his account seems to suggest resentment towards what he described as a legacy of political and military dominance of a section of the

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<sup>40</sup> Adewale Ademoyega, *Why We Struck: The Story of the First Nigerian Coup* (Ibadan: Evans, 1981), 60.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph Nanven Garba, "Revolution" in *Nigeria: Another View* (London: Africa Journal Limited, 1982), 44

<sup>43</sup> Ademoyega, *Why We Struck*, 87-89.

country over the rest of the federation.<sup>44</sup> He criticized the concentration of military establishments in the North, the use of a quota system in military recruitment, the interference of the political class in the army including promotion of officers and the use of the army to settle political problems. In analyzing Madiebo's view, however, it is important to consider that although he was a top military officer, he was not involved in the coup and so his views may not reflect those of the coup plotters.

Among the plotters, the reason for the January 15 coup went beyond ethnic interest. Although the coup was mainly masterminded by Igbos, there were also devoted supporters from Yoruba and Hausa ethnic groups.<sup>45</sup> One of the five majors that constituted the inner caucus in the plot, Adewale Ademoyega, was a Yoruba of the Western Region. John Atom Kpera (later Governor of Benue State), Ifere and Mayaki (their others names not mentioned) from the Northern Region participated in the coup. Hassan Katsina who later became the military Governor of the Northern Region after the coup allegedly supported the leader of the coup, Chukwuma Nzeogwu, in Kaduna.<sup>46</sup>

The reaction to the coup reveals something about the mood of the country at that time. The ailing economy exacerbated political violence in places like the Western Region and Tiv community. This explains why the military intervention appeared to be a popular revolt. The Hausa seemed not to have been displeased by the assassination of

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<sup>44</sup> Alexander A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co, 1980), 4. Alexander Madiebo was the Commander of the Biafran Army with the rank of major general until the war ended.

<sup>45</sup> Colin Legum, "Ibo Refugees Tell of Atrocities, Massacre in Northern Nigeria," *Global and Mail*, October 18, 1966.

<sup>46</sup> January 15: Before and After the 1966 Nigerian Crisis Vol. 7, File NAE, GP/X5. See also Schwarz, *Nigeria*, 199.

Ahmadu Bello (the Sardauna of Sokoto), but felt bitter about the way the Igbo rejoiced at the event.<sup>47</sup> Captain Joseph Garba, one of the Northern soldiers that led the July 1966 counter-coup asserted that the Sardauna's rule had been oppressive few months before he was murdered, adding that he had been obsessed with religious matters while neglecting the physical welfare of his people.<sup>48</sup>

The Nigerian government account of the coup stated that some former ministers of the former Government of Northern Nigeria were abused and taunted on their return to their provinces.<sup>49</sup> The reason for this attitude was because the political class had alienated the masses that elected them. Nonetheless, Muffett explained the ambivalence of Northerners to the coup in terms of the “national character of the North,” drawing a parallel with a similar episode during the capture of Kano by the British in 1903.<sup>50</sup> However, Colin Legum, one of the journalists who reported on the war explained the political attitudes in the Northern Region in terms of the “sheer need” for change that was more imperative in the Northern emirates than in the South where a significant level of modernization had taken place.<sup>51</sup> The coup, according to Legum, led to the emergence of

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<sup>47</sup> P.C.Lloyd “The Ethnic Background to the Nigerian Crisis” in S.K. Panter-Brick ed. *Nigerian Politics and Military Rule: Prelude to the Civil War* (London: the Athlone Press, 1970), 11.

<sup>48</sup> Garba, “*Revolution*” in *Nigeria*, 52.

<sup>49</sup> *Nigeria 1966*, Published by the (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, Lagos), January 1967, 8.

<sup>50</sup> Muffett, *Let Truth Be Told*, 70.

<sup>51</sup> Colin Legum, “Pattern for a New Nation,” September 26, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 65/446.



new political leaders such as Aminu Kano, Tunku Hakassa and Alhaji Musa Iliasu who became known as the “new men” of the North.<sup>52</sup>

In line with the ethnic interpretation of the coup, the *New Nigeria* newspaper reported that the coup plotters planned to limit their activities mainly to the North and did not plan to carry out the coup in the Eastern and the Mid-Western Regions where Igbos headed the governments.<sup>53</sup> This view has been contested by some scholars. Max Siollun has argued that the coup was attempted in both East and Mid-West but ultimately failed for planning and logistical reasons.<sup>54</sup> G. N. Uzoigwe, a renowned scholar of Nigerian history, stated that the life of the Igbo Premier of the Eastern Region, Michael Okpara, was spared because of the visit of Archbishop Makarios III of Cyprus to Eastern Nigeria.<sup>55</sup> There were also plans to arrest Nnamdi Azikiwe, an Igbo, who was the president under Tafawa Balewa’s government. This plan failed because Azikiwe happened to be away in London for medical reasons at the time of the coup. The fact that these Igbo leaders were spared strengthened the suspicion that it was an Igbo coup against the North.

Another interesting twist in the debate over the motivation of the coup was the plan to release Obafemi Awolowo, the leader of the Action Group and national opposition

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> “Nine Months to Crisis,” *New Nigeria*, October 22, 1966. This article allegedly leaked from the Federal Government press, as it was published about three months before the Federal Military Government released its own which was exactly the same as the *New Nigerian* version. The Federal Government version is titled *Nigeria 1966*.

<sup>54</sup> Max Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence: Nigeria’s Military Coup Culture (1966-1976)* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2009), 54.

<sup>55</sup> G. N. Uzoigwe, *Visions of Nationhood: The Prelude to the Nigerian Civil War* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 2011), 71-72.

leader from prison where he had been incarcerated for treason and make him the Prime Minister of Nigeria.<sup>56</sup> Several scholars have made this claim,<sup>57</sup> and this study substantiates the claim. Publications by the Eastern Region government stated that part of the reason behind the coup was to install an administration headed by civil servants and university teachers after the politicians had been removed from office. Obafemi Awolowo, a Westerner, was to be released from prison and installed as executive president of the Federal Republic.<sup>58</sup> This aspect of the coup and the intention of the coup plotters have not been fully explored. Lloyd Garrison of the *New York Times*, who visited the coup plotters in the East, recorded a revealing testimony of the conspirators. Garrison noted that the coup plotters were determined to wipe away the old civilian order, arguing that it was not an Igbo coup as Northerners thought. One of the coup plotters stated: “Half of the people we were going to call to form a new government were northerners and the man we wanted to lead the government was not an Ibo, or even a military man. He was Chief Obafemi Awolowo, a Yoruba.”<sup>59</sup> Related to this is the statement of Godwin Onyefuru, who was a participant in the coup. Onyefuru stated: “At the briefing in Major Ifeajuna’s house, it was stated that the operation was countrywide and the ‘H’ hour was given 0200 hours. Captain Udejaja was detailed to go to Calabar and release Awo; Awolowo would be made the president as soon as the OP was over.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Ademoyega, *Why We Struck*, 72.

<sup>57</sup> Emma Okocha, *Blood on the Niger: The First Black-on-Black Genocide* (New York: Gomsam Books, 2010), 215

<sup>58</sup> January 15: Before and After the 1966 Nigerian Crisis Vol. 7, File NAE, GP/X5, 19.

<sup>59</sup> Lloyd Garrison, “55 Still in Jail in Nigerian Plot,” *New York Times*, November 30, 1966.

<sup>60</sup> H.M. Njoku, *A Tragedy Without Heroes: the Nigeria-Biafra War* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1987), 180-181. Njoku was Biafra’s first Army Commander.

These plans to release Awolowo from prison and install him in power contradict popular narratives about the coup. The popular claim was that the coup had been primarily executed to wipe out the corrupt politicians and usher in a new order devoid of corruption, ethnicity and nepotism. The idea of making Awolowo, who was a part of the old order, president raises larger questions regarding the actual intention of the coup plotters and their political agenda. This plan may be interpreted as an attempt by the coup plotters to rehabilitate a politician whom they felt had been victimized by the defunct regime. Awolowo was imprisoned for treasonable felony in 1962 and was already serving his prison term when the coup took place. He had also been accused of corruption.<sup>61</sup> Another possibility could be that the coup plotters, in spite of their revolutionary rhetoric, were intent on maintaining the political status quo.

### **THE IRONSI UNITARY GOVERNMENT**

Major General Johnson Aguiyi Ironsi emerged as the military Head of State as a result of the January 15, 1966 coup. There seems to be agreement in the accounts of former military officers that General Ironsi was not involved in the January coup.<sup>62</sup> In his analysis, Uzoigwe described Ironsi as a “victim of other people’s ideas.”<sup>63</sup> Ironsi assumed the headship of the country by virtue of seniority. He was the most senior Nigerian military officer after independence. He did not share the motives that propelled the coup

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<sup>61</sup> Schwarz, *Nigeria*, 40.

<sup>62</sup> Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence*, 82. See also Nnamdi Azikwe, *Civil War Soliloquies*, (Nsukka: African Book Company, 1977), 5. Nnamdi Azikiwe, former President of Nigeria, described General Ironsi as an unwilling horse whose blood was used as oblation for a feud.

<sup>63</sup> Uzoigwe, *Visions of Nationhood*, 69.

plot. Ironsi was, in fact, marked for arrest during the coup, but he escaped following some lapses in the organization of the coup.

Ironsi's regime has been critiqued from various perspectives. While some see him as an obstruction to the January 15 "revolution," others see him as an unfortunate captain of a ship in a turbulent sea. These opinions are based on his policies as a head of state. The failure of Ironsi's regime cut short the relief people had expressed in the wake of military coup. Rather than taking pragmatic steps, he introduced what he called "Unification Decree or Decree No 34" of May 24, 1966, which changed Nigeria from federal to a unitary state in 1966. This was interpreted by some Northern leaders as the first step towards Igbo domination.<sup>64</sup> This resulted in the Northerners turning against Igbos in riots and mass killings. Nnamdi Azikiwe who was the president of Nigeria in the ousted government, denounced the "Unification Decree" as a "unilateral act that arbitrarily jettisoned the fundamental basis of the Nigerian union."<sup>65</sup> Contrary to Azikiwe's description of the decree as a unilateral act carried out by Ironsi, the decree was issued with the full agreement of Northern military leaders.<sup>66</sup> Gowon, who later became military head of state, and Hassan Katsina, the Governor of the Northern Region, agreed to the unification decree based on the prevailing circumstance.

Although Ironsi's policies and programs might have been aimed at uniting the disparate parts of the country, the decree obviously raised suspicion and violent reactions

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<sup>64</sup> Nigeria: Debate, August 22, 1968, File NAUK, FCO 38/211.

<sup>65</sup> Nnamdi Azikiwe, *Origins of the Nigerian Civil War* (Apapa: Nigerian National Press, 1969), 2

<sup>66</sup> Colin Legum, "Ibo Refugees Tell of Atrocities, Massacre in Northern Nigeria" *Global and Mail*, October 18, 1966.

in the North.<sup>67</sup> According to a newspaper report, the “decree in fact, altered the very basis of the Nigerian political system and was done without adequate consultation.”<sup>68</sup> The reaction to the Decree in the North was widespread violence. On May 29, 1966, many Northerners carried anti-Ironsi banners and chanted “Let there be secession,” “We do not want military government,” “No Unitary government without referendum,” and “Down with Ironsi.”<sup>69</sup> The riots were masterminded by civil servants and students. They also had a religious overtone as military officers of Northern Region origin openly talked about a coming “jihad.”<sup>70</sup> The killing and looting, which lasted one week, left about 200,000 Igbos dead.<sup>71</sup> A key reason for the Northern opposition to the decree was because it neglected the imbalance in the educational development of the North and the South. The Unification Decree would have been advantageous to a South that had a more educated population to fill vacancies in federal civil service.

One of the major criticisms of Ironsi’s policies was that he failed to prosecute the coup plotters. This was the basis of the countercoup of July 1966. Northerners felt that he should have court-martialed Nzeogwu and his group when the coup failed. In one of his meetings with the *emirs* of the Northern Region, they requested that those responsible for the January coup should be brought to justice as a test of the National Military

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<sup>67</sup> Yakubu Gowon, “Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War: Some Preliminary Critical Notes” in Yakubu Gowon and Philip Effiong, *The Nigerian Civil War and its Aftermath: Views from Within* (Ibadan: John Archers Publishers Ltd., 2001), 11.

<sup>68</sup> “Yakubu Gowon: Soldier Statesman,” *Daily Sketch*, October 19, 1970.

<sup>69</sup> Muffett, *Let Truth Be Told*, 83-87.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 83-87.

<sup>71</sup> Lloyd Garrison, “Revolts Cripple Army in Nigeria,” *New York Times*, August 9, 1966.

Government's good faith. Ironsi gave a disappointing response to this request.<sup>72</sup> Northern military officers also demanded that the coup plotters be tried and punished if they were not to take the law into their hands.<sup>73</sup>

Walter Schwarz observed that there had been an unrelenting demand for revenge among Northerners, not necessarily because of the death of the Sardauna of Sokoto, Ahmadu Bello, Balewa and other politicians but because of the murder of the Northern military officers.<sup>74</sup> The murder of the Northern officers complicated the assumed salvage mission of the conspirators. The *talakawa* (common people or peasants in Hausa language) on the other hand, wanted immediate retaliation for the murder of the Northern Region Premier but were prevented by their ruler, the sultan of Sokoto.<sup>75</sup> Northerners saw the January coup as an anti-North coup and expected their soldiers to retaliate since the government was unwilling to prosecute the coup plotters. Northern resentment towards Ironsi's regime united Northern groups as never before.<sup>76</sup> Bringing the "coupists" to trial might have assuaged the feelings of the Northerners and also restored discipline in the army.

Another issue that seemed to have reinforced the Northern suspicion of Igbo domination and animosity towards Ironsi's regime was his response to the May riot in which several Igbos lost their lives and property. Ironsi set up a high-powered commission of enquiry to investigate and report on the disturbances in the North. The

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<sup>72</sup> S.K. Panter-Brick, "From Military Coup to Civil War, January 1966 to May 1967" in S.K. Panter-Brick, ed., *Nigerian Politics and Military Rule*, 25.

<sup>73</sup> Njoku, *A Tragedy Without Heroes*, 53.

<sup>74</sup> Schwarz, *Nigeria*, 207-208.

<sup>75</sup> Muffett, *Let Truth Be Told*, 68-69.

<sup>76</sup> Walter Schwarz, "Can Nigeria Stay Together?" *Manchester Guardian*, August 4, 1966.

Northern interpretation of the commission was that the January 15 coup plotters had been allowed to go unpunished while the May and June violence was investigated.<sup>77</sup> Northern leaders interpreted this as evidence of Ironsi's double standard, having failed to prosecute the coup plotters.

The Igbo living in Northern Nigeria might also have contributed to the fate that befell them. One official account stated that: "the attitude of some Southerners living in the North became less friendly and 'provocative' by displaying pictures of Major Nzeogwu and the late Sardauna and commenting that the country is now in their hands and no more in the hands of Northerners."<sup>78</sup> One commentator observed that some Igbos living in Northern Nigeria allegedly made provocative statements that heightened the tension and distrust between them and the Northerners.<sup>79</sup> Other regions of the federation did not make reference to Igbo bias in the coup, but the Igbo themselves seemed to have created the impression that they were in control of the federation.<sup>80</sup>

Although official accounts attributed the May massacre to the Northern politicians who lost their positions as a result of the coup, it is evident that ill-feeling towards the Igbo predated the January 15 coup. Max Siollun, a scholar of Nigerian history, has argued that the commercial success of the Igbo and their Westernized manner in the impoverished North was strongly begrudged by their Northern neighbors who also

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<sup>77</sup> Muffett, *Let Truth Be Told*, 96.

<sup>78</sup> *Nigeria 1966*, 8.

<sup>79</sup> "Yakubu Gowon: Soldier Statesman" *Daily Sketch*, October 19, 1970.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

considered them threats to employment.<sup>81</sup> The January 15 coup triggered off pre-existing animosity and provided a justification for open attack on the Igbo and other Easterners in May 1966. The May killings, thus, became a strong reference point among people of Eastern Nigeria in the war debate.

### **THE GOWON REGIME AND THE SECESSION OF EASTERN REGION**

On Friday, July 29, 1966, following growing resentment towards the Ironsi regime, a group of soldiers of Northern origin revolted. General Ironsi's military regime was overthrown, and General Gowon, then a lieutenant colonel, assumed power, promising to restore the federal structure and to seek a workable basis for interregional harmony and national unity.<sup>82</sup> Ironsi who was attending a conference of traditional rulers in Ibadan was reportedly "kidnapped" by soldiers along with his host, the Military Governor of Western Nigeria, Lt. Col. Adekunle Fajuyi. Lt. Col. Yakubu Gowon who emerged as the Military Head of State was not the most senior army officer but had ascended to the chagrin of his superiors from other regions. One of the first actions taken by Gowon upon assuming power was the abrogation of the controversial Unification Decree No 34 that had been the source of apprehension among the Northerners.

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<sup>81</sup> Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence*, 16. For more information, see Herbert Ekwe-Ekwe, *The Biafra War: Nigeria and the Aftermath* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), 64-65; J. O. G. Achuzie, *Requiem Biafra* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1986) and Ken Saro-Wiwa, *On a Darkling Plain: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (Epsom: Saros, 1989).

<sup>82</sup> Nigeria: Debate, August 22, 1968, NAUK, FCO 38/211.



Gowon claimed that he was endorsed and supported by the majority members of the Supreme Military Council to succeed Ironsi, but this has been challenged.<sup>83</sup> *The Problem of Nigerian Unity*, a publication of the Eastern Nigerian government stated that the Supreme Military Council did not meet during the coup period, and that during its previous meetings, the decisions of the Council were never made by majority agreement.<sup>84</sup> Lt. Col Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Military Governor of Eastern Nigeria (and later leader of the Republic of Biafra), had also vetoed the Supreme Military Council meeting even when the British government had guaranteed the security of a neutral meeting place.

The military, it has to be noted, is a conservative institution with an established order and chains of command. In the absence of the most senior officer, the next in rank takes over. Ojukwu expected that Brigadier Ogundipe, a Yoruba, who was the next in rank to Ironsi, should have been appointed Head of State rather than the more junior Lt. Col. Gowon.<sup>85</sup> According to Gowon, however, the officers of Northern Nigerian origin that led the coup were not ready to accept anybody from the South to lead them.<sup>86</sup> As the political problem lasted, this question of seniority became the basis on which Ojukwu questioned the legitimacy of General Gowon's leadership as the Supreme Commander

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<sup>83</sup> Gowon, "Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War," 11.

<sup>84</sup> *The Problem of Nigerian Unity*, File NAE, GP/X4 (Enugu: Eastern Nigeria Ministry of Information, 1966) 25.

<sup>85</sup> Elaigwu, *Gowon's Nigeria*, 19.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

and Head of the National Military Government. Hence, Ojukwu referred to Gowon's administration as "the rebel regime."<sup>87</sup>

Ojukwu's non-recognition of Gowon marked the beginning of the journey to war. But this may be considered a simplistic explanation for the conflict. The justification for Ojukwu's stance lay more in the persistent mass-killing of Igbos in Northern Nigeria between May and October 1966. The September/October killing came after several army officers and non-commissioned officers of Eastern Nigeria origin had been killed in the July counter-coup. The total number of soldiers of Eastern origin killed in the July coup was put at 186. Mid-Western Nigeria lost 21 while Western Nigeria lost 6 soldiers.<sup>88</sup> As General Gowon put it, the July coup was a revenge for the January 15 coup in which Northern and Western leaders were killed.<sup>89</sup>

The killing of Igbos both military and civilians after the July coup reached a point that some Northern military officers had to intervene to stop the non-commissioned officers from the killing spree.<sup>90</sup> Some Northern soldiers like Captain Auna and RSM Dauda Mumuni paid with their lives for attempting to stop the killing. Only the intervention of Hassan Katsina, the Military Governor of the Northern Region and the Emir of Kano, brought the mutinying soldiers under control. News reporters who witnessed the killing splurge described it as a massacre.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> January 15: Before and After the 1966 Nigerian Crisis Vol. 7, File NAE, GP/X5, 1.

<sup>88</sup> January 15: Before and After the 1966 Nigerian Crisis Vol. 7, File NAE, GP/X5, 73.

<sup>89</sup> Gowon, "Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War", 11.

<sup>90</sup> Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence*, 129.

<sup>91</sup> Colin Legum, "Ibo Refugees Tell of Atrocities, Massacre in Northern Nigeria" *Globe and Mail*, October 18, 1966. See also Jorre, *The Brothers' War*, 84; Schwarz, *Nigeria*, 207.

Some accounts have suggested that the aim of the July 29 coup was two-fold: “to split the country and establish an independent Republic of the North or to re-establish the dominance of the North over the rest of Nigeria.”<sup>92</sup> Walter Schwarz noted that Northern soldiers actually hoisted a secessionist flag after their coup.<sup>93</sup> He further stated that Northern secession sentiment influenced the 1966 massacres of the Igbo because they wanted to drive the Igbo out of Nigeria. This suggests that there was an impulse towards secession among Northern political leaders. General Gowon also admitted that the demand for *Araba* (Hausa, meaning secession or to divide) and the repatriation of Northern troops was gaining strength.<sup>94</sup>

Concern over the secession of the North warranted the intervention of British High Commissioner, Francis Cumming-Bruce and the US ambassador, Elbert Matthews. They convinced Lt Colonel Murtala Muhammed (the leader of the July mutiny) and other mutineers to abandon their plans for Northern secession. Matthews informed Northern leaders that the United States would not support the Northern Region, if it seceded.<sup>95</sup> The British and American diplomats argued that the disintegration of the country would be an economic and political disaster for Nigerians.

Although some Northern Nigerian leaders such as Captain Joseph Garba (a participant in the July coup) argued that there was no secession plan among the Northern

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<sup>92</sup> January 15: Before and After the 1966 Nigerian Crisis Vol. 7, File NAE, GP/X5, 40-41.

<sup>93</sup> Walter Schwarz, “A Troubled People” *Nigeria/Biafra* April, 1969.

<sup>94</sup> Elaigwu, *Gowon’s Nigeria*, 24.

<sup>95</sup> Telegram to all African posts, August 2, 1966, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria.

leaders,<sup>96</sup> some foreign observers including Winston S. Churchill have insisted that the speech after the coup by Lt Col. Gowon<sup>97</sup> had been prepared for the dissolution of the country but had been altered at the intervention of the British and American diplomatic leaders.<sup>98</sup> Some of the journalists who followed events such as Lloyd Garrison noted that a formal declaration of the North's secession had been narrowly averted.<sup>99</sup> Corroborating this, Suzzane Cronje pointed out that the British High Commissioner, Francis Cumming-Bruce, persuaded Gowon at the last minute to delete the "vital clause" about secession.<sup>100</sup> These claims, however, remain contested.

When Gowon assumed office, he was faced with the challenge of fashioning a new formula for co-existence among the multiple ethnic groups. Although Gowon had little previous experience in politics, he was fortunate to have inherited a group of seasoned bureaucrats, who were committed to the unity of Nigeria. At the centre of the federal civil service were bureaucrats such Allison Ayida, Philip Asiodu, and A. A. Atta, who were regarded as the "super-permanent secretaries" because of their influence. People also regarded these "super-permanent Secretaries" as members of the "Oxford tribe" because they had received their degrees from Oxford University.<sup>101</sup> Ayida and

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<sup>96</sup> Garba, "Revolution" in Nigeria, 77.

<sup>97</sup> Statement Broadcast to the Nation on the Morning of Monday, 1<sup>st</sup> August, 1966, on Assumption of Office as Head of the National (Later Federal) Military Government and Supreme Commander of the Nigerian Armed Forces.

<sup>98</sup> Winston Churchill, "Can the Nigerian Crisis have a Military Solution? March 6, 1969 File NAUK, FCO 65/446.

<sup>99</sup> Lloyd Garrison, "Nigeria Outwardly Placid but Killings Increase," *New York Times*, August 4, 1966.

<sup>100</sup> Cronje, *The World and Nigeria*, 17.

<sup>101</sup> John J. Stremlau, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 26.

Asiodu, particularly, belonged to Gowon's three-member kitchen cabinet.<sup>102</sup> The close association between Gowon and these top civil servants helped to achieve stability in the fragile Gowon-led regime.

Attempts to review the constitution of the country to ensure stability met some hitches. On September 12, 1966, General Gowon summoned an Ad Hoc Committee on the Constitutional Proposals for the Future of the Federation. It convened in Lagos from September 18 to 24. While the talks were going on, another round of violence broke out in the towns of Makurdi, Minna and Kaduna, and men, women and children of Eastern origin were killed with their property destroyed. The climax came on 29th September when armed Northern soldiers backed by armed civilians massacred Easterners living in different parts of Northern towns in cold blood.<sup>103</sup> Northerners claimed they were retaliating for the alleged killing of Northerners in Eastern Nigeria.

Radio Cotonou, Republic of Benin, for unknown reasons, had reported the killing of Northern Nigerians that were living in Port Harcourt and Enugu. This report led to what Captain Garba (a participant in the July coup) described as "another round of hysterical killing" of Easterners in the North.<sup>104</sup> Some accounts suggest that the Radio Cotonou report was false and perhaps was deliberately designed to provoke further killing of Igbos in the North.<sup>105</sup> Some observers also believed that the alleged attack on Northerners in East Nigeria was a misplaced retaliation following the return of Igbo corpses and survivors of the Northern attack from the North. After some investigation by

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>103</sup> The Problem with Nigerian Unity, File NAE, GP/X4, 25.

<sup>104</sup> Garba, "Revolution" in Nigeria, 83.

<sup>105</sup> Siollun, *Oil, Politics and Violence*, 133.

the Nigerian government, the Radio Cotonou report was found to be false, and *The New Nigeria* (Northern Region's official newspaper) withdrew its distribution of the Radio Cotonou report.<sup>106</sup>

Walter Partington, a correspondent of the *London Daily Express*, who reported on the mass killing, under the heading, "The Carnage I saw" stated: "Nigerian and British diplomats are playing down the full terror, apparently to prevent panic among Europeans and what Ibos are left, and to keep Nigeria from crumbling into anarchy if there is secession from the Nigerian Federation by the embittered Eastern Region."<sup>107</sup> Colin Legum, a correspondent of the *London Observer*, in his stark portrayal of the calamity wrote: "For fear of promoting an even greater tragedy, the Nigerians have been sheltered from knowing the full magnitude of the disaster that has overtaken the Ibos in the Northern Region. The danger is that truth will not be believed, and so no proper lessons learnt, once the horror is over."<sup>108</sup> Igbo in the North were hacked, mangled and stripped naked and robbed of all their possessions. Another journalist, John de St Jorre, observed that "the October holocaust was a continuation, a crescendo to the Northerners' vengeance for their humiliations, real and imagined, under Ironsi's government."<sup>109</sup> He linked the killing to historical, social and economic factors such as envy, resentment, mistrust and the fear of domination. It is arguable whether the fear of domination as a

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> *The Nigerian Pogrom: Crisis 1966* Vol. 3 (Enugu: Ministry of Information, Eastern Region, 1966), 9-10.

<sup>108</sup> Colin Legum, "Ibo Refugees Tell of Atrocities, Massacre in Northern Nigeria," *Globe and Mail*, October 18, 1966.

<sup>109</sup> John de St. Jorre, *The Brothers' War: Biafra and Nigeria* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972), 86.

factor was still strong in the September/October killings since a Northerner was already in power. Envy and resentment towards Igbos in public and private services seemed to have been an important factor. Apart from the media accounts, the survivors of the attack disseminated their horrifying tales of the killings.<sup>110</sup>

In an interview with Lloyd Garrison (a correspondent of *The New York Times*) on the attacks on Igbos, some Northerners stated: “They are too pushy.” “They took the best jobs.” “They weren’t content to do business.” “They called us backward because we were Moslems.”<sup>111</sup> These descriptions portrayed the opinion of some Northerners about the Igbo living in Northern Nigeria. Commenting on the September/October killing, Aminu Kano, a former opposition politician in the North, stated that Northerners had been relying on outsiders to do things for them, adding that they should blame themselves if they failed to advance into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>112</sup> For Aminu Kano, the North was backward because of the presence of outsiders, particularly the Easterners who needed to be eliminated for Northerners to measure up with the Southerners. Lloyd Garrison caught this feeling when he observed that much of the animosity that provoked the killing had been generated by the push to catch up with the progressive Southern Nigerians including the Igbo.<sup>113</sup> Many Northerners believed that the killing and displacement of the Igbo in

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<sup>110</sup> See *The Nigerian Pogrom* for full accounts of these testimonies.

<sup>111</sup> Colin Legum, “Ibo Quarter of City is Deserted 2 Months After Nigeria Killings,” *New York Times*, December 13, 1966.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>113</sup> Lloyd Garrison, “Young Nigerians Dominate North,” *New York Times*, December 12, 1966.

the North would give them the long desired impetus to get rid of the less progressive aspects of their past.<sup>114</sup>

The killing was not restricted to Northern Nigeria. In Lagos and some parts of Western Nigeria, soldiers of Northern origin went on rampage, harassing and occasionally killing Eastern Nigerians.<sup>115</sup> This threat of “utter extinction” compelled the remaining Easterners numbering almost two million to return to the Eastern Region.<sup>116</sup> As hundreds of thousands of Easterners living in the North moved back to the East, more than 10,000 Northerners living in the East were transported by airplane to the North. The return of the Easterners both living and dead from the North with its embittering impact must have sent a signal of possible revenge against Northerners in the East. Insecurity was expressed by both the Northerners and the Easterners. Lloyd Garrison of *The New York Times* caught a fitting picture of the situation when he observed, “Without peace for one, there could be no peace for all.”<sup>117</sup> The country was visibly on the brink of dissolution as no single authority was able to command the allegiance and support of the entire people of Nigeria.<sup>118</sup> As the situation deteriorated, the Northern Region Military

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<sup>114</sup> Colin Legum, “Ibos May Boycott Unity Talks,” *Manchester Guardian*, October 22, 1966.

<sup>115</sup> Lt. Colonel Ojukwu’s Letter to Harold Wilson, May 30, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> Lloyd Garrison, “Prayers not Parades Mark Nigeria’s Independence,” *Globe and Mail*, October 13, 1966.

<sup>118</sup> Lt. Colonel Ojukwu’s Letter to Harold Wilson, May 30, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.



Governor, Lt Col. Hassan Katsina, appealed to the British and the United States to intervene in order to restore order in the country.<sup>119</sup>

The political uncertainty affected Gowon's ability to move the country forward. The ruling Supreme Military Council (SMC) could not hold its meetings due to the mutual fear and suspicion among its members.<sup>120</sup> The mass killing of the Igbo in the North and other parts of Nigeria stalled a planned constitutional conference. For safety reasons, Ojukwu refused to attend SMC meetings. Eastern Region leaders were concerned about the security of Easterners in the country. Ojukwu also discouraged Eastern delegates to the Ad Hoc Constitutional Committee from further participation. Gowon pleaded with delegates from other regions to prevail on their counterparts in the East and persuade them to attend the constitutional meeting.<sup>121</sup> His assurances of security could not convince delegates from the Eastern region because of the unrestrained mass-killing of Easterners in Northern Nigeria and Lagos. The situation became so tense that General Gowon agreed to send soldiers back to their respective regions of origin, a measure that was designed to reduce further clashes between Northern and Eastern soldiers.<sup>122</sup> Following his failure to convince Eastern delegates to return to the constitutional conference, Gowon indefinitely adjourned the Constitutional Committee.<sup>123</sup>

As a result of Ojukwu's refusal to send delegates to the Ad Hoc Constitutional Conference and to attend the meetings of the Supreme Military Council, General Gowon

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<sup>119</sup> Garrison, "Prayers not Parades."

<sup>120</sup> Lt. Colonel Ojukwu's Letter to Harold Wilson, May 30, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>121</sup> *Nigeria 1966*, 23.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-27.

agreed to hold a meeting of the Supreme Military Council in Aburi, Ghana on January 4 and 5, 1967. This choice was made after offers to hold the SMC meeting on board a British warship and at Benin had failed. Nonetheless, Britain was instrumental to bringing about the Aburi meeting.<sup>124</sup> The mediation of the Ghanaian Head of State, General Joseph Ankrah, was made possible by the discrete encouragement of the British.<sup>125</sup> The meeting at Aburi was intended to recreate the authority of the Supreme Military Council and to establish a working basis for solving Nigeria's problems.<sup>126</sup> At the heart of the agreement reached at Aburi was the devolution of power from the centre. Only matters that affected the entire country were to be handled by the central government. In other words, the agreement could have set the foundation for a confederacy in Nigeria.

The interpretation of the Aburi agreement has been a matter of controversy. Some have argued that the two parties had different versions of the agreement. Available evidence suggests that the Nigerian government did not pursue a full implementation of the accord. It has been suggested that the British High Commissioner in Lagos exerted maximum pressure through Nigerian civil servants to renege on that agreement so that the idea of confederacy would collapse.<sup>127</sup> Suzanne Cronje noted that some senior civil administrators were in constant touch with the British High Commission and the

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<sup>124</sup> House of Commons Official Report, *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 779, NO.77, March 13, 1969, 1690.

<sup>125</sup> Nigeria's Possible Blockade and Secession of Eastern Region: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs May 8, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>126</sup> Telegram from General Gowon to Harold Wilson, June 2, 1967, NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>127</sup> House of Commons Official Report, *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 779, NO.77, March 13, 1969, 1613.

American Embassy during the period of uncertainty that followed the second coup.<sup>128</sup>

Other accounts however deny the claim that British and American officials had any influence over the outcome of the Aburi meeting.<sup>129</sup>

What is evident, however, is that when civil servants in the federal service analyzed and interpreted the agreement, they realized that the federal government had conceded much to Ojukwu and concluded that the accord would not work as agreed. However, Gowon vetoed their objections and promulgated Decree No. 8 of 1967, which according to a senior federal civil servant, Philip Asiodu, “was an affirmation of the Aburi Accord which gave the Eastern Region under Ojukwu, more than 95 per cent of what Aburi meant.”<sup>130</sup> Decree No 8 might not have been the exact version of the Aburi Accord, but it still granted some autonomy to the various regional governments in what was described as a deliberate effort to restore confidence among the then component units of the Federation.<sup>131</sup> Ojukwu apparently wanted nothing less than *de facto* autonomy for the Eastern Region within a loose confederation.<sup>132</sup> The Federal Government alleged that Ojukwu rejected the decree because it did not contain any clause that would allow for

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<sup>128</sup> Cronje, *The World and Nigeria*, 241.

<sup>129</sup> House of Commons Official Report, *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 779, NO.77, March 13, 1969, 1690.

<sup>130</sup> Chidi Obineche, “Why Aburi Accord Failed” Interview with Chief Philip Asiodu, Permanent Secretary, Federal Ministry of Trade and Industry under Gowon’s regime, *The Sun News*, April 11, 2012. Asiodu was one of the influential permanent secretaries that fought for the unity of Nigeria from the period of the second coup till the end of the war.

<sup>131</sup> Telegram from General Gowon to Harold Wilson, June 2, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>132</sup> Possible Blockade and Secession of Eastern Region: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, May 8, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

secession.<sup>133</sup> Asiodu noted that if the Eastern region had accepted the Decree, there would have been no need for secession. “Nigeria” he asserted, “would have disintegrated in three months.” Anthony Enahoro, the Federal Commissioner for Information, argued that it was Ojukwu’s determination to secede that plunged the country into war.<sup>134</sup>

Commenting on Decree No 8, Nnamdi Azikiwe, former president of Nigeria stated that the “Decree definitely guaranteed regional autonomy and safeguarded the security of the persons and property of the citizens of Nigeria in each region.”<sup>135</sup> The London-based weekly, *West Africa*, also remarked that Decree No 8 had transformed Nigeria into a pseudo-confederation because it conceded extraordinary powers to the Military Governors, arming them with authority in the federal sphere without their being restricted in their own, excepting the proviso regarding secession.<sup>136</sup> The new decree virtually created a kind of confederation in which the regions would have had more powers than the central government. The clause providing that no region had the power to secede that was inserted in the decree appears to have been the source of Ojukwu’s dissatisfaction. There was also a provision in the decree that the Federal Military Government had the right to declare a state of emergency in any region and take control of its government in times of “public emergency” or on any occasion when democratic institutions were “threatened by subversion.”<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> *Path To A Just and Lasting Solution* (Washington DC: Embassy of Nigeria, 1968), 9.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> Azikiwe, *Origins*, 5.

<sup>136</sup> Cited in Azikiwe, *Origins*, 5-6.

<sup>137</sup> Luke Nnaemeka Aneke, *The Untold Story of the Nigeria-Biafra War: A Chronological Reconstruction of Events and Circumstances of the Nigerian Civil War* (New York: Triumph Publishing, 2007), 91. See also Azikiwe, *Origins*, 4.

There is no doubt that this clause could have been problematic to the East based on the Western Region's state of emergency experience where Tafawa Balewa, the Prime Minister, converted it to a political tool to deal with his political opponents in Action Group. The ambiguity of phrases such as "times of public emergency" and "threatened by subversion" compounded the problem. The interpretation of such phrases was left to the Federal Military Government. For Ojukwu who had challenged the legitimacy of Gowon's government, the clause could have been dangerous in application. Ojukwu therefore, considered Gowon's version of the Aburi Accord as a repudiation of the agreement and insisted on full implementation. Some Ghanaians who were part of the Aburi Agreement stated that Ojukwu was right in thinking that Gowon was in default in carrying out the Aburi Accord.<sup>138</sup> The Ghanaian Head of State, General Ankrah still went ahead to mediate over the interpretation of the agreement by scheduling a meeting with Gowon and Ojukwu. In a memorandum to the US State Department, the US Embassy in Ghana stated that while they supported Ankrah's mediation, they were not comfortable with inviting Ojukwu and Gowon to a meeting as though they were equals.<sup>139</sup> Instead, the Embassy suggested that the Supreme Military Council should schedule a meeting in Benin instead of Lagos to discuss the Aburi issue. Ankrah was encouraged to persuade Ojukwu to attend and to guarantee him of his safety in Benin. Despite Ankrah's persuasion, Ojukwu did not attend the Supreme Military Council meeting.

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<sup>138</sup> British High Commissioner's Telegram from Enugu: Nigeria Mediation, March 15, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

As the country drifted towards political stalemate, individuals took initiatives to search for possible solutions. In this regard, the Chief Justice of the Federation, Adetunbo Ademola, convened what was called the National Conciliation Committee with the sole aim of restoring peace and stability in the country. Obafemi Awolowo, who was a member of the committee, led a delegation to persuade Ojukwu to send delegates to the committee. Ojukwu replied that the idea of convening the National Conciliation Committee was initiated by the British High Commissioner and the American Ambassador to serve their interest of delaying further disintegration of Nigeria.<sup>140</sup>

The British government had in March 1967 advised some Igbo leaders not to push their grievances to the point of secession because of the risk involved.<sup>141</sup> Britain made it clear that if Ojukwu seceded, it would not recognize his government and other countries would also not recognize it. Ojukwu rejected the advice of the British government and instead sought mediation from President Nasser of Egypt.<sup>142</sup> The request for Egyptian mediation was made by a special envoy from Eastern Nigeria that came to Cairo during a Five-Nation African Summit. Nasser was disinclined to become involved, avoiding meeting the envoy and expressing his support for the continued unity of Nigeria.<sup>143</sup>

Other attempts at mediation were also unsuccessful. One such initiative was by Obafemi Awolowo the leader of the Western Region based party, the Action Group. By the time Awolowo visited Ojukwu, the latter had not yet decided on Eastern secession. He

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<sup>140</sup> Obafemi Awolowo, *Awo on the Civil War*, (Lagos: John West Publishers, 1982), 52-53.

<sup>141</sup> NAUK, FCO 38/211, Secretary of State Briefing on the Situation in Biafra

<sup>142</sup> Memorandum from the British Interest Section of the Canadian Embassy in Cairo to the British High Commission in Lagos, April 20, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/ 232.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

was still thinking in terms of Southern co-operation.<sup>144</sup> Ojukwu's intention was to collaborate with governors of the other two regions in Southern Nigeria to form a common agenda on national issues. His proposal was that if there was no meeting point at the national front, then the Southern front could hold.<sup>145</sup> This meant forming a new state that would have been made up of the three regions from the South – East, West and Mid-West Regions. Ojukwu still enjoyed cordial relations with some of his military colleagues in the South including Col. Ejoor (Governor of Mid-Western Region) and Col. Adebayo (Governor of Western Region) and appealed to them to assist him in dealing with the “intransigence” of the North.<sup>146</sup> Col. Ejoor and Col. Adebayo publicly opposed the idea of invading the Eastern Region when Hassan Katsina suggested overrunning it.<sup>147</sup>

Ojukwu's initiative on Southern co-operation was criticized by the British High Commissioner, David Hunt, who argued that Ojukwu, though an intelligent military officer, lacked political flair.<sup>148</sup> Hunt felt that the decision to secede, especially the timing was wrong. Ojukwu, he observed, should have waited because of the chaos in the Western Region where people of Western Nigeria had demanded the removal of the federal troops of Northern origin stationed there. It was expected that, in pursuit of his

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<sup>144</sup> Awolowo, *Awo*, 94.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> Nigeria: Two Military Governors: Memorandum from the British High Commissioner in Nigeria to the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, April 4, 1967, NAUK, FCO 25/232. See also David Akpode Ejoor, *Reminiscences* (Lagos: Malthouse Press Ltd, 1989), 89.

<sup>147</sup> Ambassador Matthews' Meeting with Ojukwu on April 11, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>148</sup> Nigeria: The Secession of Eastern Nigeria: Memorandum from the British High Commissioner in Nigeria to the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, July 7, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

“solid South” agenda, he should have carried along the leaders of Western region who were also contemplating declaring their own independence.<sup>149</sup>

Having failed to bring Ojukwu to the negotiating table, Gowon accepted the recommendations of the National Conciliation Committee including immediate withdrawal of all economic sanctions taken against the Eastern Region on May 23, 1967.<sup>150</sup> The National Conciliation Committee’s recommendation should have assuaged the feelings of Easterners and saved the country from the looming disintegration. Nevertheless, the Federal Military Government did more talking about the recommendations of the National Conciliation Committee than its full implementation.<sup>151</sup> Ojukwu, on his own, insisted on full implementation of the Aburi agreement and gave an ultimatum to the Federal Government to do so. He warned that if the Aburi Agreement was not fully implemented by March 31, 1967, he would have no option other than to implement them in his region.<sup>152</sup> He also stressed that he could neither allow the Eastern region to be enslaved through military occupation nor bulge from the position that Aburi decision must be fully implemented.”<sup>153</sup>

One possible interpretation of Ojukwu’s intransigence could be that he had made up his mind on secession. Another interpretation could also be that he did not find Gowon’s security assurance reliable. Whatever the reasons, one has to take cognizance of

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<sup>149</sup> Nigeria, August 10, 1967, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>150</sup> Telegraph from Gowon to Harold Wilson, May 31, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>151</sup> NAUK, FCO 23/182, Nigeria and Biafra 1968.

<sup>152</sup> “On Aburi We Stand,” A Broadcast by Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, Military Governor, Eastern Nigeria, February 25, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.



the mood of the environment in which he operated. According to Eastern Region accounts, about 30,000 Easterners were allegedly massacred in the North. There was also the influx of 2 million Easterners from Northern Nigeria, many of whom were seriously wounded and in abject penury.<sup>154</sup> The Head of State, Ironsi, along with several top military officers of Eastern origin had been killed. It is also instructive to note that Ojukwu had persuaded Easterners to go back to the North after the first mass killing in May 1966, believing that the security of lives and property of Easterners in the North would be guaranteed. This seemed to have been a mistake as more Easterners were killed in different parts of Northern Nigeria.

### **PRELUDE TO THE WAR**

On March 30, 1967, the Eastern Government published a Revenue Edict directing all federal revenue collectors in the East to pay to the Eastern Region's Treasury instead of Lagos.<sup>155</sup> The Edict was promulgated to ensure the availability of funds for the running of the government.<sup>156</sup> The Eastern Nigeria government claimed that the edict was promulgated because the Federal Government owed the region its statutory revenues. Ojukwu also argued that Nigeria's fiscal year ended in March and that he needed to make provision for the 2 million Easterners that had been displaced from other parts of

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<sup>154</sup> Lt. Colonel Ojukwu's Letter to Harold Wilson, May 30, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>155</sup> Record of a Rebel: Background Notes on the Events in the Federal Republic of Nigeria, Issued by the Embassy of Nigeria, Washington, 4/68/2, File NAE, FRP/X15, 3.

<sup>156</sup> Njoku, *A Tragedy Without Heroes*, 119.

Nigeria.<sup>157</sup> On April 1, the Federal Government declared the Revenue Collection Edict illegal and unconstitutional and three days later, all the flights of Nigerian Airways to Eastern Nigeria were suspended.<sup>158</sup> As the muscle flexing continued, the Eastern region took over Federal services in the East including harbours, the Nigerian Broadcasting Corporation, the Posts and Telegraphs Department, the Nigerian Railway Corporation and the Nigerian Coal Corporation.

Ojukwu had stopped attending Supreme Military Council meetings and so was not present when the decision to impose economic blockade on the Eastern Region was made. The Eastern Region's border with Cameroon was sealed off and the Nigerian Navy was deployed to patrol along the Calabar and Port Harcourt waterways. The Federal Government also withdrew all diplomatic passports issued to officials of Eastern Nigeria origin. Federal employees working in the East were denied their salaries.<sup>159</sup> The Eastern Region government reacted publicly. On March 10, 1967, the government, in a full-page advertisement entitled, "Nigeria's Last Hope" warned that it would consider any measure that would affect Eastern Nigeria without the concurrence of its representatives in the Supreme Military Council as a provocative act aimed at pushing the Eastern Region out of the federation.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Lt. Colonel Ojukwu's Letter to Harold Wilson, May 30, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>158</sup> Azikiwe, *Origins*, 7.

<sup>159</sup> Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, *Biafra: Selected Speeches with Journal of Events* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 168. For more information, see Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, *Because I am Involved* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Ltd, 1989).

<sup>160</sup> Nigeria: Memorandum from the British Embassy in Washington DC to the Foreign Office, March 10, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

By April 1967, the tensions between the two parties were escalating to a tipping point. On April 5, 1967, for instance, an aircraft belonging to Nigeria Airways landed at Port Harcourt (then a city in Eastern Region) and was allegedly seized on Ojukwu's instruction.<sup>161</sup> Eight days later, another aircraft belonging to Nigeria Airways that had taken off from Benin was also hijacked and diverted to Enugu by five men believed to be Easterners. Alarmed by this development, Awolowo, at a meeting of "Leaders of Thought of Western Region and Lagos" held at Ibadan on 1 May warned: "If the Eastern Region is allowed by acts of omission or commission to secede, from or opt out of Nigeria, then the Western Region and Lagos must also stay out of the Federation."<sup>162</sup> This was one of the most controversial statements made during this crisis period. To some, it meant a "wait and see" posture. Others saw it as a call to the federal government to employ any possible tool to prevent Eastern secession. Yet others argued that it strengthened the position of the Eastern Region.<sup>163</sup> However, Joseph Palmer II, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs at the State Department, observed that Awolowo's statement had a considerable effect of keeping the Yoruba on the Nigerian side at least for a moment.<sup>164</sup>

On May 26, 1967, the Eastern Assembly of Chiefs and Elders voted for the secession of the Eastern Region in the interest of "self-preservation" and proposed the

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<sup>161</sup> Record of a Rebel: Background Notes on the Events in the Federal Republic of Nigeria, File NAE, FRP/X15, 4.

<sup>162</sup> Awolowo, *Awo*, 18.

<sup>163</sup> S.K. Okpi, Oral interview, July 13, 2011.

<sup>164</sup> Internal Situation in Nigeria, August 15, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

name, Democratic Republic of Biafra.<sup>165</sup> The word, Biafra, was taken from the 19<sup>th</sup> century title of the British Consul for the Bights of Benin and Biafra.<sup>166</sup> The following day, the Joint Consultative Assembly passed a resolution that mandated Ojukwu to declare independence.<sup>167</sup> The choice of the word “mandated” suggests that the declaration was a binding order which Ojukwu had to carry out. The British High Commissioner, David Hunt believed that the members of the Consultative Assembly were handpicked for the sole purpose of declaring independence.<sup>168</sup> In this view, the Assembly’s declaration did not represent the entire opinion or interest of Eastern Nigeria. While it is true that the Consultative Assembly had not been elected in popular elections, their decision seemed to have been popular among many Easterners who felt that Easterners were no longer in Nigeria.

Exactly two hours after the news of Biafran independence declaration was broadcast, General Gowon made a national broadcast in which he denounced the Eastern Assembly resolution.<sup>169</sup> He pointed out that what was at stake was the survival of Nigeria as a political and economic unit.<sup>170</sup> Recapitulating what he described as the continued defiance of the Federal Authority by the Eastern Region and his effort to find a solution through peaceful negotiations, Gowon stated that he was left with the choice of either

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<sup>165</sup> Ojukwu, *Biafra*, 191-193.

<sup>166</sup> An Assessment of the Situation in Nigeria, September 7, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>167</sup> Nigeria: Secession of Eastern Nigeria: Memorandum from the British High Commissioner in Nigeria to the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, July 7, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> *Birth of New Nigeria* (Lagos: Nigerian National Press, 1967), 3.

saving Nigeria or acquiescence in secession and disintegration.<sup>171</sup> He therefore declared a state of emergency throughout the country. In addition, he announced the creation of twelve states out of the existing four regions based on ethnic affiliation.<sup>172</sup> The Eastern Region was divided into the East Central State, Rivers State and South-Eastern State and Ojukwu was appointed military administrator of East Central State only.<sup>173</sup> Gowon saw the state creation as a measure to achieve stability and redress the imbalance inherent in the regional system. He also reasoned that it would eliminate the fear of domination of the rest of Nigeria by any one ethnic group.<sup>174</sup> Further to these, the Federal Military Government re-imposed the economic sanction until such a time when the Eastern Military Government would abrogate its revenue edicts on revenue collection and administration of federal statutory corporations located in the East.

In a meeting with an official of the British High Commission in Lagos, Gowon stated that Ojukwu had seceded “in all but name” and had challenged the Federal government to do something that would enable him to secede *de jure*, hoping to get international sympathy.<sup>175</sup> The High Commission official observed that the federal government was tired of making repeated concessions to Ojukwu without any corresponding result. Decree No 8 had gone a long way to meet him with no response

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>172</sup> Nigeria: Secession of Eastern Nigeria: Memorandum from the British High Commissioner in Nigeria to the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, July 7, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>173</sup> Telegraph from Gowon to Harold Wilson, May 31, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid. See also *The Struggle for One Nigeria* (Lagos: Nigerian National Press, 1967).

<sup>175</sup> Memorandum from the British High Commission in Lagos to the Commonwealth Office, April 11, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

beyond “abuse and the revenue collection edict.”<sup>176</sup> In a memorandum by the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, it was noted that since January 1967 there had been a deliberate and steady withdrawal by the Eastern Region from contact with the rest of Nigeria.<sup>177</sup> According to the memorandum, the East had become virtually separate economically and only formal constitutional ties still held it within the federation. The British Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, Herbert Bowden observed that Ojukwu would settle for nothing short of *de facto* autonomy for the region within a loose confederation, and if he could not get that, he was ready to secede.<sup>178</sup> There was also a growing suspicion among Nigerian officials that American sympathies were with the East and that Ojukwu was hoping to get recognition if he seceded.<sup>179</sup> To dispel this impression, Ambassador Matthews travelled to Enugu. The US State Department believed that Ambassador Matthews’ visit would make Ojukwu rethink if he was anticipating American support.<sup>180</sup>

However, the events of 1966 in which two governments were toppled in coups and many Igbos of the Eastern Region were massacred in the North had left an “indelible scar on the Eastern Region’s relations with the North-oriented government.”<sup>181</sup>

Commenting on the psychological aspect of the conflict, the British High Commissioner

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Possible Blockade and Secession of Eastern Region: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, May 8, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/ 232.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Memorandum on Ambassador Matthew’s Meeting with Gowon and Ojukwu, April 15, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Possible Blockade and Secession of Eastern Region: Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, May 8, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/ 232.

to Nigeria, David Hunt, observed that the Igbos were grievously shocked by the mass killing of members of their ethnic group in Northern Nigeria.<sup>182</sup> The 1966 killings formed the basis of Biafran propaganda for self-determination at the international community. Gowon's suspicion that Ojukwu's actions were informed by his hope to get international sympathy and support was not baseless. Biafran appeals for humanitarian intervention, as would be seen in the next chapter, would target the international community using emotive themes such as genocide and religion.

The creation of new states was Gowon's trump card. The pronouncement of state creation had both political and economic implications. Politically, it meant Biafra's loss of solidarity from members of the minority groups. On the economic front, it would cut the Igbo off from the coastline and deny them access to oil revenue as the new states-South-Eastern and Rivers had much of the oil deposits in their areas. A press release by the Ojukwu-led administration declared Gowon's state creation dictatorial, unrealistic and inapplicable to the Eastern Region.<sup>183</sup> Consequently, the Eastern Region seceded and proclaimed the Republic of Biafra on May 30, 1967, with a flag that had horizontal stripes of red, black and green, with a rising sun in the middle. The declaration of the independence of Biafra was accompanied by administrative decrees that were promulgated to establish it. One such decree was the Republic of Biafra Proclamation

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<sup>182</sup> Nigeria: Secession of Eastern Nigeria: Memorandum from the British High Commissioner in Nigeria to the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, July 7, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>183</sup> Ojukwu, *Biafra*, 177.

Decree of May 30, 1967.<sup>184</sup> This decree dissolved the ties between the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the former Eastern Nigeria and declared that any contractual obligation entered into by any authority or organization within the Republic of Biafra would be deemed to have been entered into with the Government of the Republic of Biafra. It was on the basis of this decree that the Biafran Government demanded oil royalties from the Shell/BP Company. Another important decree was the Provincial (Amendment) Edict of June 1, 1967. This edict, which was considered to have come into effect on December 1966 divided Biafra into 20 provinces.<sup>185</sup>

Under these tense circumstances, Gowon blamed the continuing crisis and the declaration of the independence of Biafra on the intransigence of the Military Governor of Eastern Nigeria, Col. Ojukwu. In a telegraph to the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, Gowon lamented, “All the concessions I have made have been rebuffed.”<sup>186</sup> He stressed that under the present constitution of Nigeria such a declaration was illegal and unconstitutional and could only be regarded as an act of rebellion.<sup>187</sup> Gowon also declared that any attempt at recognition of Biafra as a sovereign state would amount to interference in the domestic affairs of Nigeria and would be regarded as an unfriendly act.<sup>188</sup> General Gowon declared that the three Eastern states remained integral parts of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, warning that all countries and international organizations should respect the territorial integrity of Nigeria and should avoid giving any help whatsoever to

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<sup>184</sup> Memorandum from the British High Commission, Lagos to the Commonwealth Office, July 8, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Telegraph from Gowon to Harold Wilson, May 31, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.



Ojukwu's "rebel" camp. On July 1, 1967, Ojukwu was dismissed as Governor of East Central State and from the Nigerian Army.<sup>189</sup>

Until April 13, 1967 Gowon was still flexible on the Eastern Region threat to secede. The US Ambassador, Matthews, in a meeting with Gowon on April 13, had observed what he called "a new factor."<sup>190</sup> Gowon had suggested to Ambassador Matthews that if the proposed meeting of the Supreme Military Council failed, Ojukwu and the Igbo should be given the option of seceding and establishing their "little Switzerland within Nigeria."<sup>191</sup> This was a serious development to Ambassador Matthews who had warned against secession. Ambassador Matthews predicted the collapse of Eastern Nigeria's resistance in six months. According to him, Eastern Nigerians lacked unity and resilience to mount a lasting resistance, Ojukwu notwithstanding.<sup>192</sup> The American Ambassador's misguided conclusion about the quick collapse of Eastern Nigeria's resistance probably informed Gowon's move to a more hard-line posture.

As the conflict between the Nigerian government and Biafra grew to a boiling point, the Nigerian government ordered a "police action" to deal with Ojukwu's intransigence. Captain Garba admitted that "It is true that on July 6, Nigeria fired the first formal shot in the civil war."<sup>193</sup> Garba, however, stated that the acts of provocation had come from Ojukwu. Gowon's planned "quick surgical operation" against Biafra turned

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<sup>189</sup> *The Struggle for One Nigeria*, (Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information, 1967), 19.

<sup>190</sup> Telegram from Sir David Hunt to the Commonwealth Office, April 14, 1967, NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>192</sup> Ambassador Matthews' Meeting with Ojukwu on April 11, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>193</sup> Garba, *"Revolution" in Nigeria*, 95.

out to be an underestimation of Biafra's military might.<sup>194</sup> Consequently, the Federal Military Government resorted to full military action.

The question of who started the war has been frequently asked. Some pro-Biafra critics argue that Nigeria started the war while pro-Federal critics attribute the blame to Biafra. Those who hold the view that Biafra started the war argue that the Federal Military Government took action in defense of national unity and sovereignty. Some argue that Ojukwu “pulled the trigger and declared war on his fatherland.”<sup>195</sup> Others who interpret secession under international law as an act of war suggest that Ojukwu, by seceding, declared war against Nigeria.<sup>196</sup> Those who subscribe to the view that Nigeria started the war, argue that Biafra had been dragged into the war with the first strike. This view is in line with Ojukwu's radio broadcast in 1967 in which he declared that the people of Biafra should hold themselves ready to exercise their right to self-preservation.<sup>197</sup> What is evident is that Nigeria made the first armed attack on Biafra on July 6, 1967.<sup>198</sup> The interpretation of the first strike from the international perspective is consistent with the notion that “he who first uses arms is called the aggressor.”<sup>199</sup> In this sense, the federal government which declared “police action” against Biafra following the

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<sup>194</sup> Lt. Col. Victor Banjo, a Yoruba, led the Biafran Army later called “the Liberation Army of Nigeria” in the Mid-West. Banjo, in a Broadcast, declared that he did not believe in Biafra or secession, but was only out to liberate Nigeria from the oppression of the Northern oligarchy. See the Adewale Ademoyega, *Why We Struck*, 147.

<sup>195</sup> Understanding the Nigerian Crisis, File NAE, Unclassified Document, 2.

<sup>196</sup> Enechi Onyia, Senior Advocate of Nigeria and war survivor interviewed in Enugu, July 20, 2011.

<sup>197</sup> Ojukwu, *Biafra*, 203.

<sup>198</sup> House of Commons Official Report, *Parliamentary Debates*, Vol. 786, No. 146, London, July 10, 1969, 1613.

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.*

secession might be considered the aggressor. However, the Nigerian government took the military option of liquidating the Biafran “rebellion” because of its confidence in winning on the diplomatic front.<sup>200</sup>

A related question that has frequently arisen in the scholarship is whether there was a justification for the war. Was there no option left for Eastern Nigeria other than secession? In addressing this question, the key tension is between the theses of self-preservation and preservation of national unity. The argument for a united Nigeria is based on the fact that the Federal Military Government had made some concessions to placate the Eastern Region, all of which were rejected by Ojukwu. The creation of new states to which the Eastern Region objected was justified by the fact that the unwieldy structure of the federal government based on the regional system had created room for the domination of the minority groups in the North and South. Having defied the Federal authority by the “illegalities” and rejected some peace initiatives, critics argue that Ojukwu nursed a selfish ambition of building an empire. To support this claim, the federal government argued that since the Igbo felt the solution to their problem lay in self-determination, Biafra should not have included other ethnic minorities that had long agitated for their own state.<sup>201</sup> Biafra’s right to self-determination, the Nigerian government stressed, should have been restricted to the East Central State, which is peopled by the Igbo and does not include minority tribes like Efik, Ijaw and Ibibio. These

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<sup>200</sup> Memorandum on Possible Biafran Capitulation from the British High Commission, Lagos to the Commonwealth Office, September 22, 1968. File NAUK, FCO 38/221.

<sup>201</sup> *Part To A Just*, 10.

minority ethnic groups, the Nigerian government argued, remained susceptible to the domination of the Igbo and may not have shared the Igbo vision of an independent Biafra.

Another argument against the Biafran cause is Biafra's invasion of the Mid-Western Region which had tried to remain neutral during the conflict. The federal government saw this invasion as an expansionary move by Biafra. The Nigerian government believed that Biafra's invasion of the Mid-Western Region (partly inhabited by the Igbo group) and the Western Region was a prelude to the invasion of the North.<sup>202</sup> During the six-week occupation of the Mid-West Region by the Biafran soldiers, the soldiers' slogan, "Southern Nigeria solidarity" was replaced with the slogan, "Igbo survival." This lends credence to the argument that Ojukwu had expansionary ambitions. Ron McGraw, a Canadian missionary who served as World Council of Churches Relief administrator in Biafra, noted that the invasion of the Mid-West region was a mistake on the part of Biafra as it united the rest of Nigeria against Biafra.<sup>203</sup> Some commentators felt that Biafran secession became inevitable when Ojukwu began to turn the politico-military struggle into a more personal rift.<sup>204</sup>

The case for Biafra's self-preservation on the other hand, has been based on the horror of killings perpetrated against the people of Eastern Nigeria by Northerners. Ojukwu was quoted as saying, "We are fighting this dreadful war not for conquest but for

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>203</sup> Ron McGraw, Oral interview, Niagara-on-the-Lake, February 21, 2012. Ron was a chemistry teacher at Hope Waddell Institute, Calabar from 1960 till the outbreak of the war. He voluntarily served with the World Council of Churches as relief administrator in Biafra.

<sup>204</sup> Nigeria and Biafra 1968, File NAUK, FCO 23/182.

survival.”<sup>205</sup> The Igbo had suffered several rounds of massacre in the Northern and Western Regions. There was the unprovoked attack against the Igbo in 1953. On May 29, 1966, the protest against the Ironsi regime and the controversial Decree No 34 brought another spate of killings. Ojukwu, then a federalist, encouraged the Igbo to return to the North after the May attack. Again, on July 29 1966, there was a counter coup that claimed the lives of military officers and many civilians of Eastern origin (largely Igbos). Another unrestrained attack was also unleashed on the same Eastern group in Northern Nigeria from September 29 to October, 1966. There was a high sense of insecurity resulting in the movement of soldiers and civilians to their regions of origin. Out of the 400,000 Igbos that returned from the North within that period, at least 10,000 had either machete or gun wounds, according to the Refugee Rehabilitation Commission.<sup>206</sup> Almost every family was affected by the anti-Igbo killing.<sup>207</sup> Nnamdi Azikiwe, a former president of Nigeria, stated that the “pogroms” were deliberate and calculated.<sup>208</sup> He further noted that the fact that these massacres were concentrated on innocent Biafrans proved that Biafrans could not be safe elsewhere except in their homeland.<sup>209</sup>

Some commentators have blamed the secession of Eastern Nigeria on the refusal of the Federal Military Government to implement the Aburi Accord as agreed. Writing in

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<sup>205</sup> “Nigeria’s Civil War: Hate, Hunger and the Will to Survive,” *Time*, August 23, 1968.

<sup>206</sup> Lloyd Garrison, “Injured Refugees Stun Nigeria City,” *New York Times*, October 14, 1966.

<sup>207</sup> Lawrence Akpu, Chukwu Usim, Chukwuneke Adolphus, Akani Joseph Egwu, Festus Mba, Israel Nwagbara and Ifeacho Joseph, all disabled war veterans interviewed in July 2011, at Okwe, Imo State, agree that the return of Igbos from the North with injuries and headless bodies had an embittering impact that made them join the Biafran Army.

<sup>208</sup> “Full Text of a Speech by Dr Nnamdi Azikiwe to Biafran Troops on Sunday, February 25, 1968” *Biafra Newsletter*, Vol.1 No. 9, Friday, March 15, 1968.

<sup>209</sup> *Ibid.*

*The Irish Times* in 1968, John Horgan argued that the failure to implement the Aburi Agreement was a point in Ojukwu's favour.<sup>210</sup> Horgan stated that Gowon too would have had a strong case if he had fully implemented the recommendations of the National Conciliation Committee instead of just talking about it. Some other commentators criticized the Federal Military Government for repudiating the Aburi Agreement and allowing the situation to degenerate into a civil war.<sup>211</sup> They believed that the crisis could have been averted if the Federal Military Government had resisted the recommendations of their senior civil servant not to implement the Aburi agreement. Winston S. Churchill, a correspondent of *The Times*, noted that if Britain, in concert with the US had exerted their influence as they did in 1966 when the Northern leaders threatened to secede, the Aburi Agreement might well have been salvaged or some other diplomatic solution found to preserve the concept of one Nigeria through peaceful means.<sup>212</sup> Similarly, Suzanne Cronje, observed that the relationship between the Federal Military Government and the government of the Eastern Region began to deteriorate rapidly when it became clear that Gowon was not willing to implement the Aburi agreement.<sup>213</sup> According to Cronje, the meeting at Aburi was an eleventh hour attempt to prevent the federation from disintegration.

The self-preservation argument advanced by Biafra officials also drew on the principles of John Locke. They talked about Locke's argument about inalienable rights

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<sup>210</sup> Biafra and Nigeria 1968, File NAUK, FCO 23/182.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid.

<sup>212</sup> Winston S. Churchill, "Can the Nigerian Crisis have a Military Solution?" March 6, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 65/446.

<sup>213</sup> Suzanne Cronje, "Two Levels of Truth," *Nigeria/Biafra*, April 1969.

such as right to life, right to liberty and right to property. Justifying their cause, Biafran officials stated “...whosoever uses force to threaten life, liberty and/or property, does it without right and therefore puts himself into a state of war with those against whom he uses it; under that state all ties are cancelled, all other rights cease, and everyone has the right to defend himself and resist aggression.”<sup>214</sup> Biafran officials also drew parallels between their struggles for self-determination with other struggles around the world. Among such references were the American war of independence against Britain in 1776, the Chinese resistance against the Japanese invasion in 1937, the Polish resistance to the German invasion in 1939, the Irish nationalist resistance against the United Kingdom and the Israeli war against the Arabs. For Biafrans, the struggle meant a war of survival, a war of self-preservation given rise to by the circumstances in which they found themselves.<sup>215</sup>

### **THE COURSE OF THE WAR**

Given the scope and focus of this thesis, it is not necessary to offer an in-depth discussion of how the war went. It suffices to provide a cursory overview of the key developments in the conflict as a background to a discussion on the humanitarian dimension of the war discussed in subsequent chapters. The Nigeria-Biafra War began on July 6, 1967 and ended on January 15, 1970. Biafra surrendered to the Nigerian government on January 12, 1970 but the instrument of surrender was signed on January 15, 1970. The war was one of the world’s tragic conflicts that defied easy solutions.

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<sup>214</sup> “War of Liberation: Our Challenge” *Biafra Newsletter*, Vol.1 No. 4, Friday, December 8, 1967.

<sup>215</sup> *Ibid.*

Neither the Organization of African Unity (OAU, now African Union) nor the United Nations could successfully mediate in the conflict. The United Nations Secretary General, U Thant, apathetically pushed the responsibility of peace negotiation to the OAU, stressing that the UN's role in the conflict would be exclusively humanitarian.<sup>216</sup> U Thant argued that his attitude to the conflict was guided by the OAU resolution in Algiers which among other things stated that all state members of the UNO and the OAU should abstain from all actions liable to prejudice the unity, territorial integrity and peace of Nigeria.<sup>217</sup> The OAU, however, was unable to achieve effective mediation. The issues involved were difficult for them to manage. It was partly a conflict of rights – territorial integrity versus human rights. The Nigerian government argued that the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the country must be protected within the framework of a united Nigeria whereas Biafra contested that it had the right to secede since the security of the life of its citizens was no longer guaranteed by the Nigerian government. This was the basis of the struggle that claimed over two million lives in less than three years.

The Nigerian government's interpretation of the war as a domestic conflict was not entirely true. External powers soon became involved in the war. Britain and the USSR supported the Nigerian government while France supported Biafra. The United States on the other hand chose to be "militarily neutral," limiting its role to humanitarian aid to both Nigeria and Biafra. At the beginning of the conflict, however, the main object of British

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<sup>216</sup> Secretary-General's Introduction to His Annual Report for the Period 1967/1968: Nigeria, September 27, 1968, File NAUK, FCO 38/230.

<sup>217</sup> Secretary of State's Visit to the United Nations and Washington, October 7-15, 1968, NAUK, FCO 38/230.



policy was to avoid doing anything that could antagonize Biafra.<sup>218</sup> Britain did not want to declare open support to any group. They took a “wait and see” posture to avoid being on the wrong side if Biafra succeeded in defending its independence.<sup>219</sup> Owing to its oil interest, Britain was also very careful to avoid being accused of plotting the secession of Biafra. British officials were generally pleased with the pro-Biafran reports on the war by the British press, notably, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).<sup>220</sup> One of the first articles to appear in *The Times* contained every single cliché of Biafran propaganda.<sup>221</sup>

Britain had also refused to sell aircraft to Nigeria on the grounds that it was an “offensive weapon.”<sup>222</sup> Nevertheless, the major reason behind Britain’s initial refusal to grant Nigeria’s request for military hardware lay in the 1961 unilateral abrogation of the defense pact that Nigeria had entered into with the British government.<sup>223</sup> The defense agreement included, among other things, the provision of a Royal Air Force post in Kano in exchange for technical aeronautic assistance. The war appeared to have provided an opportunity for Britain to remind the Nigerian government of its “wrong doing.” However, Britain’s refusal to sell aircraft to the Nigerian government nearly cost it its influence in Nigeria.

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<sup>218</sup> Nigeria: Secession of Eastern Nigeria: Memorandum from the British High Commissioner in Nigeria to the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, July 7, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> “Arms Supply” by Neville Brown, Lecturer in International Politics at Birmingham University and Defence Correspondent of *the New Statesman*, File NAUK, FCO 65/446.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

Following the refusal of the British government to sell arms to Nigeria, the Nigerian government looked for an alternative source in the USSR. Three or four weeks after the secession, the Nigerian government sent a delegation to Moscow to procure armaments. By August 1967, Soviet made weapons including MIG 17 interceptor aircraft and Delfin light strike trainers were being transported to Kano Airport.<sup>224</sup> Some of the Delfins and MIGs came to Lagos in a Polish ship. These deliveries were accompanied by dozens of Czech and Soviet technicians. Egyptian pilots were also brought in to fly the MIGs. European and South African mercenaries were also hired to operate the Delfins. The refusal of Britain to provide military support seemed to have provided an opportunity for Russia and Egypt to recover from the prestige they had lost in the June 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Alarmed at the growth of Russian influence, Britain started supplying Nigeria with what it called “defensive armaments” and subsequently “traditional armaments.”<sup>225</sup> Britain’s fear of Soviet influence in Nigeria led to a massive supply of arms that exceeded the “traditional” supplies.<sup>226</sup>

In addition to supplying arms to the Nigerian government, Britain provided the logistic and diplomatic support necessary to implement an economic blockade.<sup>227</sup> The Nigerian blockade of Biafra would not have been effective without British support. Before the war broke out, the Nigerian Navy was small and inexperienced. The Nigerian government therefore approached the British for warships and sought simultaneously to

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Winston S. Churchill, “Can the Nigerian Crisis have a Military Solution?” March 6, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 65/446.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> “Blind Spot on Biafra,” November 14, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 65/446.

obtain the support of British shipping companies. Britain urged the federal government to weigh the repercussions of blockade and drew their attention to the undesirability of involving foreign companies in an internal matter. British officials also stressed that British warships would not be involved in the blockade but agreed to arm Nigerian merchant ships enforcing the blockade.<sup>228</sup> According to Herbert Bowden, the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, Britain did not want to respond to the conflict in advance but had to wait on events.<sup>229</sup> Its later decision to support Nigeria was primarily based on the calculation that Nigeria would win the war and that the blockade was a potent weapon that would help bring victory.<sup>230</sup> Britain and Russia not only provided military and diplomatic support to the Nigerian government but also gave the federal cause credibility with the international community.

As the blockade tightened, more Biafrans died of starvation. The incidence of diseases and deaths associated with starvation attracted the attention of the international community. Both Biafra and other interest groups accused the Nigerian government of genocide by starvation. In its defence, the Nigerian government argued that starvation was a legitimate instrument of warfare.<sup>231</sup> It was on the basis of the human suffering

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<sup>228</sup> Blockade Against Eastern Nigeria, April 26, 1967, File NAUK, FCO 25/232.

<sup>229</sup> NAUK, FCO 25/232, Memorandum by the Secretary of State for Commonwealth Affairs, May 8, 1967.

<sup>230</sup> "Blind Spot on Biafra," November 14, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 65/446.

<sup>231</sup> Proposed Resolution to Recognize Biafra at the Congress of the United States by Honorable Bill Brock, July 16, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

associated with the conflict that some African countries such as Zambia, Tanzania, Ivory Coast and Gabon recognized Biafra as an independent country.<sup>232</sup>

Until the war broke out on July 6, 1967, the Biafran territory did not have need for international humanitarian aid. Although the former Eastern Region, with a high population density had the lowest per capita protein production among other regions in Nigeria, it was still able to sustain itself without experiencing widespread starvation.<sup>233</sup> The heritage of food deficiency partly contributed to the history of Eastern peoples' migration to other parts of Nigeria. The food deficiency heritage, especially among the Igbo has led some scholars to conclude that the war-time blockade did not induce the incidence of starvation.<sup>234</sup> As fate would have it, the migration of many Easterners to other parts of Nigeria at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and their economic success, led to the development of a less protein deficient diet than many other regions in Nigeria.<sup>235</sup> For instance, the Igbo developed a flourishing inter-regional trade that helped to provide much of protein foods that were not produced in the region. The Eastern Region only began to experience food crisis after the massacre of Easterners and their influx to the Eastern Region. The problem was further exacerbated by the imposition of blockade by the Nigerian government.

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<sup>232</sup> Peace Talks, File NAUK, FCO 38/221. See also Case for Recognition of Biafra: Statement by Government of the United Republic of Tanzania, April 13, 1968.

<sup>233</sup> Michael A. Samuels, ed., "The Nigeria-Biafra Conflict" (Report of a One-Day Conference Organised by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Georgetown University, Washington, D. C., May 22, 1969),1.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

This background is important because the Christian missionaries, who initiated and sustained the humanitarian aid in Biafra had been very active in evangelizing the former Eastern Region since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As of 1965, the Catholic Church alone had over 424 foreign priests in Eastern Nigeria.<sup>236</sup> Other major churches such as the Presbyterian, Anglican and Methodist Churches had similar number of missionaries. Until the war broke out, missionary activities were restricted to evangelism and the provision of social services such as education and medical care.<sup>237</sup> Nonetheless, such social services were not entirely free. The local people had to pay some money to cover the cost of educational and medical services provided by the missionaries.<sup>238</sup> Food aid was not part of the service provided by the missionaries. Even at the height of the rivalry between the Church Missionary Society and the Society for of the Holy Ghost Fathers, no group considered food aid a strategy to win more followers in Igboland. Had there been a noticeable food crisis in Eastern Nigeria, it is likely that the missionaries would have extended their service to include the provision of food aid as a strategy for gaining converts and expanding their spheres of influence.

## CONCLUSION

From the preceding discussion, it is evident that the foundation of Nigeria as a state was inherently faulty and fragile. The colonial authorities that established the state in 1914 did not take into consideration the socio-cultural and political differences among the

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<sup>236</sup> Official Catholic Directory, 1965, File NAUK, FCO /23/182.

<sup>237</sup> E. A. Ayandele, *Nigerian Historical Studies* (London: Frank Cass, 1979), 183-188.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

peoples that made up the country. The policies and constitutional framework of colonial Nigeria did little to unite the peoples. The political leaders at independence, therefore, saw themselves as regional or ethnic champions rather than as national leaders. It was not surprising that the unity of the country was rocked by divisive forces soon after independence.

Although the first military coup of January 1967 was widely interpreted by Northerners as an Igbo-led coup against the North, there is also strong evidence to suggest a deep-seated animosity against the Igbo by the Northerners that predated the coup. Evidently, the first coup which was allegedly staged to save the country from its socioeconomic and political problems largely contributed to plunging the country into crisis. The perception that the January coup was targeted mainly against Northern political and military leaders led to a countercoup which was not just a reprisal attack but also a disproportionate revenge that claimed Igbo lives. The mass-killings that followed the coup claimed even more victims. The first military coup, the countercoup, the pogroms in the North and the eventual war that lasted thirty months marked a period of grave political and social instability in Nigeria which had significant international ramifications.

The Nigeria-Biafra War was a conflict in which the warring parties claimed rights. To the Federal Military Government, the unity and territorial integrity of the country was at stake and had to be addressed militarily. To Biafra, the conflict was a matter of national survival. Biafrans saw their struggle as a protest against the legitimacy of the existing constitutional arrangement. A key tension in the conflict, however, was the divergence

between the humanitarian and political interpretations of the war. Media reports and propaganda activities of the two warring parties divided the world community into humanitarian and political actors. The intervention of the humanitarian groups and how their interventions shaped the war debates constitute the focus of the subsequent chapters.

### CHAPTER 3 HUMANITARIAN IMPULSE

By December 1967, six months after the outbreak of the war, Biafra had started experiencing widespread and severe cases of nutritional deficiency. At this early stage of the war, starvation in Biafra was largely unknown to the outside world because of the blockade and limited communication between people in the besieged Biafran territory and the outside world. The telephone system in Biafra had been destroyed due to fighting in the course of the war. As a result, the church and missionary organizations in Biafra were cut off from normal communications with the rest of the world. One missionary described his church as “the Church of Silence,” an overt comparison to churches under communist regimes.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the Nigerian government was not inclined to provide information on the humanitarian crisis in the Biafran territory as this might attract international attention. The initial reports about the starvation only came from the missionaries in Biafra, many of whom felt morally obliged to tell the world about the growing mass starvation and mortality rate in the territory.<sup>2</sup> Since the Nigerian government presented the conflict as a domestic matter, most journalists who visited Nigeria were influenced to report the war from the perspective of the Nigerian government. Concerned about censorship by Nigerian officials, the British journalist, Frederick Forsyth, resigned his position with the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and moved to Biafra as a freelancer and later

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<sup>1</sup> “Stop Supporting,” *Catholic Herald*, March 15, 1968, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Ken Waters, “Influencing the Message: The Role of Catholic Missionaries in Media Coverage of the Nigerian Civil War” *The Catholic Historical Review*, 90 no. 4 (2004), 715.



reported for the *Daily Express* and *Time* magazine.<sup>3</sup> Even when the reports about the humanitarian crisis in Biafra became more widely known internationally, there was no channel for sending humanitarian aid to Biafra. Many individuals and organizations that expressed an early interest in sending relief supplies to Biafra had difficulties doing so.<sup>4</sup> By the time international relief operation commenced fully in August 1968, about 1 million persons had died of malnutrition, starvation and diseases.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter explores the groups whose efforts catalyzed and sustained the large scale humanitarian effort in Biafra. The chapter argues that the appeal by missionaries and the media campaign that followed set in motion a humanitarian movement that eventually led to the formation of the Joint Church Aid (JCA), a consortium of Catholic and Protestant Churches. Other international groups and organizations such as the Biafran overseas press, Markpress, Jewish organizations and other emergent groups that were dedicated to the Biafran cause joined in the campaign for humanitarian aid after the missionaries had opened the way by drawing the attention of the world community to the humanitarian crisis. To provide some context for a more detailed discussion of the role of the JCA provided in the subsequent chapters, this chapter focuses on a few of the individuals and groups that participated in the campaign to send humanitarian aid to Biafra.

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<sup>3</sup> Frederick Forsyth, *The Biafra Story: The Making of an African Legend* (England: Pen and Sword, 2009), iii.

<sup>4</sup> Reverend G. E. Igwe, Biafra, A Nation of Human Beings in Need, June 18, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-5-10.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

## **THE FOOD CRISIS AND MALNUTRITION IN BIAFRA**

The need for humanitarian aid in Biafra became apparent to the missionaries and the Biafran government just a few months after the outbreak of the war in July 1967. The Eastern Region (later Biafra) with a low per capita protein production supplemented its protein needs by importing protein-rich foods such as beef, beans and fish. Meat, beans, and peanuts, for example, were supplied from Northern Nigeria while fish was imported from Europe, mainly Iceland. The Biafran government saw protein deficiency as a huge problem following the mass movement of refugees<sup>6</sup> from other parts of Nigeria after the 1966 massacres of Eastern Nigerians in Northern Nigeria. The Nigerian government blockaded the major sources of protein food for the 15 million Biafrans in May 1967, resulting in widespread protein deficiency and malnutrition in the population. Between May and June 1968 when Biafra lost its major food producing areas in the Cross River valley (including Ogoja, Abakaliki and Edda) and Port Harcourt to Nigerian troops, starvation had become a major problem. This led to an urgent appeal by the Biafran Head of State, General Ojukwu, to the world's humanitarian agencies to come to the aid of the

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<sup>6</sup> The term refugees usually refers to people who have crossed the international boundary of their country due to political conflict, natural disaster or fear of racial, ethnic or religious persecution. However, the people of Eastern Nigeria who left Northern Nigeria for Eastern Nigeria due to the 1966 massacres were all described as refugees. They could have been better described as internally displaced persons since they did not cross any international boundary till the region seceded. Given that documents on the war collectively refer to the prewar displaced group from Northern Nigeria and the internally displaced persons in Biafra as refugees, the term will be used as such.

people of Biafra.<sup>7</sup> The foreign Christian missionaries who had initiated the appeal for humanitarian aid also intensified their efforts.

According to C. Nwokolo, who was the Medical Coordinator of the Biafran Refugee Medical Service Rehabilitation Commission, kwashiorkor<sup>8</sup> (malignant protein deficiency disease), which came to be associated with the conflict was uncommon in prewar Biafra.<sup>9</sup> Six months after the outbreak of the war, doctors became alarmed at the definite increase in malnutrition cases, and by April 1968, many children referred from refugee camps died in hospitals.<sup>10</sup> Herman J. Middlekoop, a Dutch missionary doctor at Queen Elizabeth Hospital Umuahia confirmed Nwokolo's observation when he noted, "In all of 1963, I saw at the most only 100 cases of malnutrition. Since June of 1968, at least, 1,000 cases of extreme malnutrition are seen daily at Queen Elizabeth Hospital."<sup>11</sup> Evelyn Shellenberger who served as a nurse at Abiriba Joint Hospital noted 300 severe cases of malnutrition a day in September 1968 instead of the 100 severe cases that were recorded

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<sup>7</sup> Reverend G. E. Igwe, Biafra: A Nation of Human Beings in Need, June 18, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-5-10.

<sup>8</sup> Kwashiorkor is a Ghanaian word for malnutrition meaning, red man or deprived one. The term refers to the reddish-yellowish hair which is a prominent symptom of the disease. For more information see "Blockaded Biafra Facing Starvation: Blockaded Biafrans Are Facing Mass Starvation," *New York Times*, June 30, 1968, 1.

<sup>9</sup> C. Nwokolo, *Biafran Refugees: Problems of Disease Prevention and Medical Care* (Enugu: Biafra Rehabilitation Commission, 1969), 22. Nwokolo was the Medical Coordinator, Refugee Medical Service Rehabilitation Commission and Head, Department of Medicine, University of Biafra (formerly University of Nigeria) Medical School.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> John J. Mullen's Report on Herman J. Middlekoop's Relief Work in Biafra (n.d), File PCCA 1973-5005-7-8. Middlekoop was a member of the Netherlands Reformed Church. He was also the coordinator of WCC relief work in Biafra. He assumed that responsibility in February 1968 after he was bombed out of Eja Memorial Hospital, Itigidi where he had served since 1962.

in 1966.<sup>12</sup> Within the month of September 1968, about 6,000 persons died daily from protein deficiency and starvation, and by December 1968, more than 500,000 Biafrans would die of the same disease Shellenberger, estimated.<sup>13</sup> Kwashiorkor and marasmus (general undernourishment), the diseases that made the war infamous became prevalent, leading to a widespread call for humanitarian aid. Children between 18 months and 10 years were the initial victims of the diseases, but adults were later affected by hunger edema and deficiencies of nicotinic acid, thiamine and riboflavin leading to anemia.<sup>14</sup>

A Nigerian Army nurse in Calabar area reported after a five-week tour of the region, “I did not see a single child who was not suffering from kwashiorkor, and most of them have had the disease for at least three months.”<sup>15</sup> During his visit to some refugee camps and villages, Lloyd Garrison of *the New York Times* observed that many children in Biafra had visibly reached a “point of no return” in their health conditions and that those who would be lucky to survive the malnutrition disease would grow up with permanent mental impairment due to malformation of their brains.<sup>16</sup> The malnutrition ravage was particularly common among children who had just come off breastfeeding. These children were so dehydrated and miserable that they had lost their appetite to eat. They also had grotesquely swollen stomach and limbs, scaly skin, red hair, hollow eye

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<sup>12</sup> Evelyn Shellenberger, “Staving Off Starvation,” Reprinted with permission from the March 1969 Issue of *American Journal of Nursing* by the American Friends Service Committee, July 10, 1969, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Nwokolo, *Biafran Refugees*, 26.

<sup>15</sup> Alfred Friendly, “Needy Biafrans Getting Food Aid,” *New York Times*, June 20, 1968, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Lloyd Garrison, “Biafra: And Then Children Die,” *New York Times*, August 4, 1968, E6.

sockets and acute weakness that resulted in pains. Many Biafrans called the kwashiorkor disease “Gowon’s boot” or “Harold Wilson’s syndrome,” obvious references to the leaders thought to be responsible for the blockade and mass civilian deaths.<sup>17</sup>

The mass media’s reporting of kwashiorkor in Biafra and the attendant deaths led to calls by church groups, concerned individuals and humanitarian organizations for urgent food and medical supplies to Biafra. Television brought the expressionless faces of starving people who clearly did not understand the cause of their anguish to the living rooms of Europe and North America. The pathetic and heart-breaking condition of children struck deep into the conscience of the Western world. In fact, Biafra was the first war to be widely televised in Africa. The labels, holocaust and genocide were terms commonly used by Biafran sympathizers, and many people in the Western world easily associated pictures of malnourished Biafran children with those liberated from the Nazi death camps.<sup>18</sup> Some of the newspaper headlines read, “In Biafra, Death by Famine Strikes Everywhere,”<sup>19</sup> and “For God’s Sake Send Help-Quickly.”<sup>20</sup>

Middlekoop noted that deaths due to starvation were so high that people lost count.<sup>21</sup> Henry Jaggi of the International Committee of the Red Cross described the death

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<sup>17</sup> John de St Jorre, *The Brothers’ War: Biafra and Nigeria* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972), 238. See also Ntieyong U. Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession, 1966-1970: A Personal Account of the Nigerian War* (London: Frank Cass, 1972)

<sup>18</sup> Philip Gourevitch, “Alms Dealers: Can You Provide Humanitarian Aid Without Facilitating Conflict?” *New Yorker*, October 11, 2010.

<sup>19</sup> “In Biafra, Death by Famine Strikes Everywhere: Relief Aides Insist Massive Food Airlift Is the Only Hope for Salvation,” *New York Times*, June 30, 1968, 12.

<sup>20</sup> “For God’s Sake Send Help-Quickly,” *News of the World*, June 30, 1968.

<sup>21</sup> “In Biafra, Death by Famine Strikes Everywhere,” 12.

rate as an upward sloping curve.<sup>22</sup> Commenting on the nutrition crisis in Biafra, Howard Rusk, a doctor, noted that there had never been disturbing pictures of malnourished children in the news media than those of starving Biafran children.<sup>23</sup> Describing the starving children, Rusk stated that day after day, the Biafran children stared with sad, bulging, luster eyes that seemed to ask pathetically, “Why don’t you help us?”<sup>24</sup> Rusk’s graphic description of the stages of malnutrition and its impact, especially permanent damage to vital organs of the body and premature death helped to awaken people’s consciousness to the dangers of starvation and the dangers of placing politics above the lives of innocent children. The tragedy caused by starvation thus, presented Biafra to some people as an emotional and humanitarian question rather than a piece of African geography or political reality. Such representations by the media, missionaries and Markpress, the Geneva-based public relations firm retained by the Biafran government, awakened the collective conscience of the world, leading to an unprecedented relief operation since the Second World War.

### **THE FOREIGN MISSIONARIES**

The Biafran famine presented many humanitarian groups with urgent demands for humanitarian aid. The Norwegian Church Relief and the Dutch Protestant Churches recognized the starvation crisis as early as November 1967 and began to mobilize public

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<sup>22</sup> “Blockaded Biafra Facing Starvation: Blockaded Biafrans Are Facing Mass Starvation,” *New York Times*, June 30, 1968, 1.

<sup>23</sup> “Starvation in Biafra: Symptoms Like Those of the Victims in Nigerian Dispute Are Described,” *New York Times*, September 22, 1968, 49. Rusk had a distinguished career, founded the World Rehabilitation Fund (1955), served various post Second World War US administrations and is known as the “father of rehabilitation medicine.”

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

opinion in Europe for humanitarian assistance.<sup>25</sup> Before the war began, the Norwegian and Dutch missionary groups, like many other church groups, were well established in the former Eastern Nigeria. Norway for instance, had a project known as the Norcap agricultural project.<sup>26</sup> Their long presence in Biafra gave them the opportunity to have first-hand information about the life of common people in the rural areas. Following the initial appeals from these church groups for aid in November 1967, Danchurchaid Copenhagen sent money and food supplies to the starving population through the World Council of Churches (WCC) in December 1967.<sup>27</sup> This initial response was only a trickle compared to the huge number of civilians already affected by starvation and diseases. It took the larger campaign efforts of other missionaries, especially Irish priests, the Biafran government, and common people to arouse the conscience of the Western world to the horrifying suffering and death of the civilian masses in Biafra.<sup>28</sup>

In March 1968 when the symptoms of malnutrition became very common among children in refugee camps, Bishop Joseph Whelan who was in charge of Owerri Diocese, appealed to the Catholic Church in Britain and the United States for dry milk.<sup>29</sup> The money raised towards buying the milk was channeled through the African Continental

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<sup>25</sup> Hugh G. Lloyd, Mona L Mollerup and Carl A. Bratved, *The Nordchurchaid Airlift to Biafra, 1968-1970: An Operation Report* (Copenhagen: Folkekirkens Nodhjaep, 1972), 5.

<sup>26</sup> The Norcap project site at Ikwo in Ebonyi State is the present location of Ebonyi State College of Education, which was formerly a college of agriculture. When I joined the college as a lecturer, I noticed that most of the buildings that served as offices were inherited from the Norcap.

<sup>27</sup> Lloyd, Mollerup and Bratved, *The Nordchurchaid Airlift*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> Alvin Shulter, "In Nigeria's Civil War, Humanitarianism Comes In a Poor Second," *New York Times*, August 18, 1968, E4.

<sup>29</sup> "Missionaries Hit in Biafra," *Catholic Herald*, March 8, 1968, 9.

Bank, Cheapside, London. The American Catholic Organization also sent £84,000 worth of drugs and about 3,900 kilograms of dry milk to Bishop Whelan. Reverend Father Kilbride, who had been on leave in the US from Biafra, collected the donations and sent them to Europe where Caritas had them shipped to Biafra. Bishop Whelan received the donations and presented them to the Biafran government for distribution to the hospitals.<sup>30</sup> At this time, there was no coordinating organization such as the Joint Church Aid.

As the starvation became more serious, Bishop Whelan embarked on a campaign for food support in Europe. During his visit to London in June 1968, he informed the press that nearly four million Biafran refugees were starving to death. Bishop Wilson of Birmingham who was at the conference observed that when he was in Biafra in March 1968, there were already signs of starvation and malnutrition.<sup>31</sup> These reports further moved the director of the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (Oxfam) Leslie Kirkley, to launch an appeal to raise emergency funds to assist the suffering civilians in Biafra. After a visit to some feeding centers in Biafra, Kirkley noted: “Unless we pull out all the stops in Britain and other countries, we will have a terrifying disaster in Biafra before the end of August, 1968. By then, two million may have died.”<sup>32</sup> Sister Mary Lorcan of the Holy Rosary Sisters at Emekuku, near Owerri, told Kirkley that even if the war ended immediately, several hundreds of thousands of children who had severe cases of

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<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> “4 Million Biafran Refugees, Says Bishop,” *Catholic Herald*, June 21, 1968, 1.

<sup>32</sup> “Blockaded Biafra Facing Starvation.”



malnutrition would be condemned to death.<sup>33</sup> Reverend Nicholas Stacey, an Oxfam assistant director who also visited Biafra confirmed the need for urgent humanitarian intervention to prevent further widespread starvation.<sup>34</sup> Caritas and Oxfam further embarked on an aggressive media campaign that generated huge donations from different church groups in Britain.

Many of the pleas for humanitarian aid in Biafra did not sit well with the Nigerian government. In a joint meeting with the relief agencies on July 19, 1968, the Nigerian Head of State, General Gowon, lambasted the Oxfam and Caritas representatives for making “biased appeals” through newspaper advertisements.<sup>35</sup> Gowon complained that the leaders of these relief organizations, in media interviews, were making reference to the secessionist region as “Biafra,” a word that amounted to recognition as far as the Nigerian authorities were concerned. An Oxfam representative at the meeting, Timothy Brierly, apologized on behalf of his organization for the misunderstanding and assured Gowon that his organization would not do anything that would cause any suspicion of the humanitarian motives of his organization.<sup>36</sup> The Nigerian government’s reaction, however, did not stop the church groups from carrying on with their campaign for humanitarian aid.

On July 31, 1968, Holgar Wricke, a West German doctor with the World Council of Churches in Biafra stated in a news conference in Geneva that as many as 40 percent

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> “Plight of Refugees in Biafra,” *Catholic Herald*, July 5, 1968, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Nigeria: Peace Talks and Relief Assistance, July 19, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-1-5 .

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

of the children in the besieged territory of Biafra would die if urgent relief supply was not sent.<sup>37</sup> Wricke's estimate was based on his experience at Anang Province which was already occupied by the Nigerian troops. Wricke, who compared the situation in the Nigerian-held territory to the region under Biafran control quoted nutritional experts as saying that the mortality rate in Biafra would climb even much higher.<sup>38</sup> Middlekoop, the organizing secretary for the Christian Council of Biafra also made a daily appeal for world humanitarian support through Radio Biafra. Middlekoop's broadcast which was received in Europe called for medical supplies, especially measles vaccine.<sup>39</sup>

Another significant effort that stimulated humanitarian response in Biafra came from Reverend Father Tony Byrne, the Director of Catholic Relief in Biafra, who held a number of press conferences in different parts of Europe and the US. In a press conference in Dublin in October 1968, Byrne told his audience that Biafra would experience the severest famine between November and December 1968, if urgent steps were not taken.<sup>40</sup> Byrne made this remark when he came to recruit staff that would serve in the evacuation of 3,000 Biafran children under the Caritas project. In a letter he sent through Byrne, Bishop Whelan informed the press conference that the situation in Biafra was "hopeless" and that the war was a "holocaust of hundred thousand little ones."<sup>41</sup> Reverend Father Kevin Doheny described Biafran children as the main victims of

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<sup>37</sup> "Higher Death Toll Foreseen," *New York Times*, August 1, 1968, 3.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> "Biafra Broadcasts Call for Food Aid," *New York Times*, December 8, 1968, 11.

<sup>40</sup> "Big Famine Threatens Biafra," *Catholic Herald*, October 18, 1968, 1.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

Nigeria's "deliberate policy to starve Biafrans through a land and sea blockade."<sup>42</sup>

Another firsthand account of the food crisis was provided by Father Raymond F. Maher who reported that hundreds of thousands of people in refugee camps were "slowly but surely" dying of starvation in Biafra. Father Maher, who wrote from Aba, stated that shortage of food was impossible to overcome because the Nigerian troops "frequently and deliberately" harvested crops that were growing on the farm, seized food that were stored in the barn and stopped farmers from carrying out their normal farm work.<sup>43</sup> These actions suggested a deliberate effort to starve civilians to death. Most of these accounts attributed the humanitarian crisis directly to the actions of the Nigerian government. The missionaries highlighted the Nigerian government starvation policy and the misery it had caused innocent civilians through the media. As a result of the missionaries' strategic use of the media in communicating with the world community, ordinary people in Europe and North America were able to see and feel the devastation caused by the starvation in their own living rooms through the television.<sup>44</sup>

As the Biafran famine gained more publicity in Europe, a group of Christian churches in Switzerland sent a delegation to Britain to meet Cardinal Heenan and the Archbishop of Canterbury to discuss ways of bringing the war to an end and alleviating the suffering of the people.<sup>45</sup> After that meeting, Cardinal Heenan directed priests in the Westminster Archdiocese to appeal to their congregations to pray for Biafra and appeal

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<sup>42</sup> Ken Waters, "Influencing the Message," 697.

<sup>43</sup> "Biafra Starvation," *Catholic Herald*, July 18, 1968, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Tony Byrne, *Airlift to Biafra: Breaching the Blockade* (Dublin: the Columba Press, 1997), 44.

<sup>45</sup> "Plight of Refugees."

for funds for relief supplies.<sup>46</sup> With this directive, the campaign for humanitarian support for Biafra gained more momentum and generated a huge response from individuals and groups in Britain. Cardinal Heenan's earlier sermon on the mass suffering in Biafra on June 2, 1968 had also received a huge response leading to public protests in Britain.<sup>47</sup> The motivation of the missionaries to bring the suffering civilians in Biafran to the consciousness of the world community did not only lead to a large scale humanitarian aid but also galvanized different church groups in Europe and North America into forming the Joint Church Aid. A discussion of the role of the JCA is taken up in succeeding chapters of this dissertation. As a prelude to this, it is necessary to examine the role of other organizations in raising global consciousness about the humanitarian crisis in Biafra.

### **MARKPRESS**

While the church groups were mobilizing food support for Biafrans, the Biafran government was also looking for a way to create a more organized and centralized publicity network that would draw the attention of the global community to the situation in Biafra. In January 1968, the Biafran leader, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu entered into a contract with William Bernhardt, the 54-year-old American and chief executive officer of Markpress to manage the international front of the Biafran publicity.<sup>48</sup> Markpress, a Geneva-based public relations firm was part of H. William Bernhardt Incorporated established in 1951. This

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> "Biafra: Cardinal's Help to Humanity," *Catholic Herald*, June 21, 1968.

<sup>48</sup> "Letter to the Foreign Editor," Markpress, Biafran Overseas Press Division, February 29, 1968, PCCA, 1973-5005-9-2.

company, named after its principal, had been successful in various high profile promotional campaigns, including the sale of the Lockheed Starfighter to the West German Air Force.<sup>49</sup> Bernhardt took on the Biafran account more for humanitarian reasons than for political reasons. The initial negotiated cost of this service was 12,000 Swiss francs per month (£1,200).<sup>50</sup> According to Bernhardt, this fee was just to cover the running costs of the operation. In addition to his humanitarian concern, Bernhardt also looked forward to the end of the hostilities when he hoped to assist Biafrans with economic investments.<sup>51</sup> This suggests that he was optimistic about Biafra's victory. It could also mean that Bernhardt's interests were both economic and humanitarian, given that Biafra's huge oil resource was a source of attraction to some groups involved in the conflict.<sup>52</sup> While Markpress was already successful in its promotional campaigns, the Biafra War bestowed upon it more publicity and recognition at the international level. Markpress' job was to collect incoming news from Biafra, compile the news releases and feature stories and distribute them to media outlets, such as international wire services, radio and television networks, newspapers and magazines. Markpress was solely responsible for matters pertaining to the world press.

To a large extent, Markpress was successful in presenting the Biafran humanitarian crisis to the outside world. Its efficiency excited sympathy and humanitarian support in Europe and North America. The agency was able to create a mailing list of 3000 recipients, which

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<sup>49</sup> Memorandum from Foreign and Commonwealth Office to E. Youde of 10 Downing Street, May 20, 1969, File National Archives of the United Kingdom (hereafter, NAUK), FCO 65/ 445/1.

<sup>50</sup> Roy Brunton, "Biafra's Publicity Machine," July 10, 1968, File NAUK, FCO 95/225.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Robert Fitch and Mary Oppenheimer, "Let Them Eat Oil" *Ramparts Magazine*, September 1968.

included leading world newspapers, news agencies, individual friends of Biafra and the entire British House of Commons. Recipients of Markpress news releases did not pay for the copies they received but were solicited to contribute to the Biafran Refugee Rehabilitation Commission through its account in Switzerland.<sup>53</sup> The cost was borne by Biafra. Although the reports were widely read in Britain, Markpress did not rely on agents in Britain to distribute its reports. The agency sent its materials directly from Geneva by post. However, the unofficial Biafran office in London may have also been helpful in disseminating some of the materials. Owing to doubts about the Foreign and Commonwealth Office's (FCO) sympathies, Markpress' distribution network bypassed the FCO in charge of West Africa. This made it difficult for the FCO to have access to copies of its communiqués.

How did Markpress generate the reports it disseminated? Some observers were under the impression that the agency had correspondents on the ground that regularly furnished it with updates about the war. In fact, most of the press releases were provided in the first instance by the Biafran Ministry of Information. Markpress relied on reports received from Biafra through the teleprinter, which were then transmitted to the desired destinations. This explains why there was little or no difference between the news carried by Radio Biafra and the news reported by Markpress. The Biafran Ministry of Information had its officials in the field who gathered the reports that were transmitted by the ministry to Markpress through Lisbon. The goal of the Biafran authorities was essentially to present the war situation, especially cases of indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets and the use of starvation as a

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<sup>53</sup> Memorandum from Foreign and Commonwealth Office to E. Youde of 10 Downing Street, May 20, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 65/445/1.

legitimate instrument of war.<sup>54</sup> Markpress also arranged trips to Biafra for reporters. The reporters had to embark on an eighteen- hour flight from Lisbon to the Portuguese island of Guinea Bissau and then to Biafra.

Markpress targeted humanitarian groups such as churches and relief agencies. In the United States, the agency presented the war as an attempt to extinguish Catholic Igbos through starvation.<sup>55</sup> This was aimed at enlisting the support of the Catholic Church. This probably explains why the Kennedys were strongly in support of Biafra.<sup>56</sup> Senator Edward M. Kennedy, in his first speech on the senate floor after the assassination of his brother Senator Robert F. Kennedy, described the Biafran famine as the “one of the greatest nightmares of modern times.”<sup>57</sup> Speaking as the chairman of the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on refugees, Kennedy urged the United Nations to send food and other necessary supplies to the starving civilians in Biafra, arguing that the casualties in the Nigeria-Biafra War were ten times greater than those in Vietnam.<sup>58</sup> He also criticized the Johnson administration for remaining silent when 6,000 persons were dying daily as a result of starvation.<sup>59</sup> The UN Secretary General, U Thant, replied to these charges by explaining that his position on Biafra was guided by the Organization of African Unity’s resolution in Algiers, which solidly supported a Nigerian solution based on unity and

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<sup>54</sup> “Certain Overtones of Genocide” in Nigeria’s Conduct of Her War Against Biafra, Says ICRC Chief Delegate, Markpress, GEN 414, November 25, 1968, PCCA, 1973-5005-9-2.

<sup>55</sup> Memorandum on “Biafran” Propaganda Report in the US, File NAUK FCO, 26/300.

<sup>56</sup> Nigeria Press Summary, January 9, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>57</sup> Peter Grose, “Kennedy Urges UN Action on Starving Biafrans,” *New York Times*, September 24, 1968, 3.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

territorial integrity.<sup>60</sup> Radio Kaduna, which was controlled by the Nigerian government, accused Kennedy of not wanting to see Nigeria “sow the seed of greatness” as well as using every diplomatic means to bring about a supervised cease-fire.<sup>61</sup> Kennedy rejoined that humanitarian considerations must override “petty political objections.”<sup>62</sup>

Markpress’ reports seemed to have produced more results among the church groups in the United States. The Washington State Council of Churches, for instance, urged President Johnson to use all diplomatic measures to help provide unrestricted relief supply.<sup>63</sup> The Roman Catholic leaders in Nigeria became concerned about the growing interest of the churches in the crisis.<sup>64</sup> British officials tried to counter the churches’ growing humanitarian support for Biafra by sending Reverend Father McGuinness, an Irish priest who had graduated from Cambridge University along with Tom Burns, editor of *The Tablet*, an English weekly for Catholic intellectuals to visit the US for a period of about two weeks.<sup>65</sup> These two men were considered suitable for the job because of their connection with the Catholic Church and the British society. Nigerian government officials also thought them capable of selling the Federal Government’s war aims to the Catholic Church in the United States.

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<sup>60</sup> Secretary of State’s Visit to the United Nations and Washington, October 7-15, 1968, File NAUK, FCO 38/230.

<sup>61</sup> Kaduna Radio Commentary on Senate Debate on Nigerian Resolution, January 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>62</sup> Nigeria Press Summary, January 9, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>63</sup> Letter to President Johnson by the Washington State Council of Churches, November 16, 1968, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria.

<sup>64</sup> Memorandum from Maurice Foley to Frank Ferrari of the African American Research Institute, New York, May 20, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 65/445/1.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.



Biafra's use of the narrative and imagery of genocide by starvation as a propaganda theme proved effective. In the course of the war, this narrative resonated across the Atlantic with groups such as the American Committee to Keep Nigeria Alive (a voluntary agency that campaigned for relief aid for Biafra) which distributed leaflets alleging that the United States had threatened to boycott British goods following its arms policy on Nigeria.<sup>66</sup> The leaflets also charged that one million persons had died of starvation in Biafra, with 6,000 continuing to die every day of malnutrition. While some portions of the American society were influenced by the emotional content of the Biafran propaganda, others saw genuine need to feed the starving population.<sup>67</sup> One Columbia University student decided to protest the lack of action by setting himself on fire in front of the United Nations.<sup>68</sup> In his last word before Dr Michael H. K. Irwin, the United Nations medical chief, Mayrock said that he acted "to stop genocide in Biafra."<sup>69</sup> A Jewish rabbi who knew Mayrock described him as an idealistic young man, who was deeply upset by the starvation and mass deaths in Biafra. The rabbi also stated that Mayrock had written to President Nixon and many other government officials concerning the suffering of people in Biafra without getting any response.<sup>70</sup> The student's self-

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<sup>66</sup> British High Commissioner's Comment on Biafran Propaganda, September 27, 1968, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Airgram.

<sup>67</sup> Memorandum for the Under-Secretary: US Alternatives in the Nigerian Crisis, December 1, 1968, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria.

<sup>68</sup> Press Summary, May 30-June 2, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>69</sup> Sam Pope Brewer, Youth Sets Himself Afire at UN and Dies After Nigeria Protest, "New York Times, May 30, 1969, 1.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

immolation made headlines and triggered more protests and petitions for humanitarian support for Biafra.

The impact of the campaign for humanitarian support was as strong in Canada as it was in the United States. The blockade of Biafra and the British policy on arms supply were seen by many Canadians as an attempt by the Nigerian government and Britain to exterminate the people of Biafra. The Canadian press, which was fed with information materials by Markpress, became very hostile to British policy.<sup>71</sup> By September 1968, different church groups and interested bodies had started clamoring for emergency humanitarian action. The Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau, was subjected to parliamentary and public questioning on the Biafra issue.<sup>72</sup> Although the Foreign Affairs Minister, Mitchell Sharp, gave the impression that the government was doing something to get aid to Biafra, the Canadian public insisted that Canada should mount a separate relief operation that would deliver supplies to the Biafran refugees regardless of the political and military risks.<sup>73</sup> Canadians, like many European countries, were distressed over the deaths resulting from the starvation in Biafra and wondered why the UN could not intervene with humanitarian aid and prevent the mass death. In addition to steady flow of critical letters from the public and some members of the parliament, a group of

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<sup>71</sup> Nigeria: British Policy, September 18, 1968, File NAUK, FCO 26/300.

<sup>72</sup> Memorandum from the British High Commission, Ottawa to Commonwealth Office, September 19, 1968, NAUK. FCO 38/230.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

Canadians and Biafrans picketed the British High Commission in Ottawa and its office in Montreal.<sup>74</sup>

The British High Commission in Canada noted that the humanitarian feeling for Biafrans was so strong in Canada that it was difficult to present the British case outside government circles.<sup>75</sup> The Commission became particularly worried when Sharp threatened to present the Biafran case in the United Nations if no African country did so.<sup>76</sup> The British High Commissioner in Ottawa stated that Sharp's statement reflected the long-established Canadian view that the United Nations should play a major role in tragedies such as Biafra.<sup>77</sup> Sharp stated that he was spending more time on the Biafran crisis than any other subject. In spite of this effort, some people in Sharp's constituency in Toronto called for his resignation for not taking pragmatic steps towards alleviating the suffering in Biafra.<sup>78</sup> In the same vein, the New Democratic Party executive narrowly voted against calling on the Canadian government to formally use the Canadian Air Force to deliver relief supplies without regard to diplomatic consequences.

As the humanitarian debate in parliament mounted, the Tory opposition leader, Robert Stanfield asked, "Are we going to the United Nations after all these people in Biafra are starved?"<sup>79</sup> Not satisfied with the government's response to the humanitarian

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<sup>74</sup> Memorandum from British High Commission in Ottawa to Commonwealth Office, September 18, 1968, File NAUK, FCO 38/230.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Memorandum from the British High Commission, Ottawa to Commonwealth Office, September 19, 1968, NAUK. FCO 38/230.

<sup>78</sup> Memorandum from the British High Commission, Ottawa to Commonwealth Office, September 18, 1968, NAUK. FCO 38/230.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

crisis, Stanfield decided to place Biafra as the first subject to be discussed in the parliament.<sup>80</sup> The British government was greatly alarmed at the wave of humanitarian concern in Canada and quickly mobilized its agents to inform Sharp that Britain was in support of Nigeria and that Markpress was serving as Biafra's public relations agency.<sup>81</sup> Although the British government succeeded in persuading the Canadian government to drop its proposal to present the humanitarian question in Biafra before the UN General Assembly, public opinion for humanitarian support for Biafra remained strong. This was evident in the generous donations that led to the purchase of the Super Constellation aircraft by Canarelief (Canadian relief for Biafra). Markpress' effort to arouse global conscience to the suffering in Biafra was widely felt in many parts of Europe and North America. Although the Foreign and Commonwealth Office believed that Markpress had exaggerated the Biafran crisis, the agency continued to influence the Western media to focus on ways to reduce the suffering of the Biafran masses.<sup>82</sup>

### **AKANU IBIAM'S CAMPAIGN FOR HUMANITARIAN AID**

The Biafran government supported its publicity network by sending Akanu Ibiam, Ojukwu's political adviser, on a global campaign for humanitarian assistance. Ibiam, a British trained medical doctor and Vice President of the World Council of Churches, wrote a letter to the Canadian Council of Churches requesting relief aid to support the

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<sup>80</sup> Memorandum from the British High Commission, Ottawa to Commonwealth Office, September 19, 1968, NAUK. FCO 38/230.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Memorandum on Nigeria from Ross to John, February 12, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 26/300.

starving people of Biafra.<sup>83</sup> In his letter dated April 23, 1968, Ibiam narrated the deteriorating plight of the 2,000,000 refugees from Northern Nigeria and the internally displaced persons who had moved due to Nigeria's military action in their areas. The letter stated that Women and children who could not be accommodated in public places such as schools and churches were not only dying from hunger and diseases but were also subject to attacks from the Russian MiG fighter jets. Ibiam requested funds to purchase food for the women and children and as well as seed yams for planting from the Igbo-speaking areas of Mid-West Nigeria where food supply was more ample. The purchase and distribution of the food and seed yams were to be undertaken by a committee known as Ecumenical Committee of Church Leaders in Biafra.<sup>84</sup> In his response to Akanu Ibiam's letter, R. M. Bennett, the Acting General Secretary of the Canadian Council of Churches, recommended that the request should be channeled through the World Council of Churches as a matter of general concern rather than presenting it as Ibiam's direct appeal.<sup>85</sup>

During its Fourth Assembly in Uppsala in July 1968, the World Council of Churches opened a drive among member churches to raise \$3 million to support the war victims in Nigeria and Biafra with food and medical supplies.<sup>86</sup> After a debate about reference to Biafra, the Council decided to delete references to "Biafra" in its minutes in order not to give the impression that the ecumenical body was taking sides in the

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<sup>83</sup> Dr Akanu Ibiam's Letter to the Canadian Council of Churches, April 23, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-1.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> "World Council Opens Drive," *New York Times*, July 16, 1968, 3.

dispute.<sup>87</sup> The immediate response of the World Council of Churches, however, was the upshot of Ibiam's request.

Aside from sending letters, Ibiam travelled to several countries in Europe and North America to solicit humanitarian aid for the war victims in Biafra. As a Vice-President of the World Council of Churches, he was able to gain access to the leaders of protestant churches in Europe and North America. One of his earliest ports of calls was West Germany where he appealed to churches for moral and humanitarian supports for fellow Christians in Biafra.<sup>88</sup> At a press conference in 1968, Ibiam wondered why the world community, particularly the churches could not stop the “extermination campaign” of the Nigerian government against the 14 million Biafrans. He also expressed his regrets that “not one single Christian politician” from the Federal German government received him officially.<sup>89</sup> A disclosure from the Berlin Senate office, however, revealed that Ibiam was not received by any member of the senate because he was invited to Berlin as a guest of the Evangelical Church of Berlin Brandenburg.<sup>90</sup> The diplomatically sensitive nature of the Biafran conflict and religious connection of his mission might explain why the politicians did not want to associate officially with him. Although Ibiam was not accorded official reception by German politicians, his visit aroused humanitarian sympathy for the starving civilians in Biafra which appears to have increased the scale of German humanitarian support.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Press Conference by Biafran Leader, February 1968, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram, February 1968.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

West Germany was ranked first among the donor countries in humanitarian aid to the Biafran war victims.<sup>91</sup> The West Germans at the World Council of Churches (WCC) meeting in Uppsala in September 1968 had also been vocally and deterministically pro-Biafra.<sup>92</sup> Although many West Germans were concerned about the humanitarian crisis in Biafra, German support may also be read as part of a broader strategic decision in the 1960s to provide aid to African countries.<sup>93</sup> West Germans saw aid to Africa as part of an effort to present themselves in a new, more democratic way to the world and to separate themselves from their Nazi and colonial past.<sup>94</sup> Taken from this perspective, West German response to the Biafran famine can also be interpreted as part of its agenda in the 1960s to redefine its identity in a globalizing world.

Wherever he went, Ibiam invoked the language of genocide to describe the conflict. During his earlier visit to the US in March 1968, he alleged that “the Nigerian aim is the ultimate annihilation of 14 million people in Biafra.”<sup>95</sup> He appealed to the UN Human Rights and church groups in the US to bring pressure on their government leaders to investigate the matter in Biafra and to make the United Nations understand that two of its members - Britain and the USSR - were interfering in the internal affairs of Nigeria

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<sup>91</sup> West German Public Opinion on Nigerian Civil War, August 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>92</sup> Memorandum on the World Council of Churches Meeting in Uppsala from the British Consulate, Ibadan to the Commonwealth Office, September 16, 1968, File NAUK, FCO 23/182.

<sup>93</sup> Lauren W. Nass, “Aiding Africans: West German Perception of Race and Modernity in the 1960s” (MA Thesis, Georgia State University, 2013).

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> “Churchman Tells of Slaughter in Biafra,” *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, March 31, 1968.

through arms supplies.<sup>96</sup> He added that he would like to see a cease-fire that would bring the dispute to the negotiating table. Given the UN's well-established position of not interfering in the domestic affairs of member states on matters of sovereignty, Ibiam's appeal for UN intervention was bound to be less effective than his appeal to Church groups for humanitarian aid.<sup>97</sup>

Appalled at the loss of lives, the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches issued an urgent joint appeal, which called on the parties in conflict to stop fighting and look for a way to establish a lasting solution through negotiation.<sup>98</sup> The statement called on Christians on both sides of the conflict to meet the challenges of the conflict by showing Christian charity which demands that "we all forgive and love in Christ those with whom we are in conflict."<sup>99</sup> In addition, the two bodies sent an appeal to US President Lyndon Johnson to help establish peace in the conflict.<sup>100</sup> This marked the first time that the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches would agree to make a joint appeal for a united action by the global community for the restoration of peace in Nigeria.<sup>101</sup> This joint statement was neutral in tone, exhorting the

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Thomas G. Weiss and Don Hubert, *The Responsibility to Protect: Report of the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 2001), 8.

<sup>98</sup> Common Statement by the Roman Catholic Church and the World Council of Churches for the Establishment of Peace in the Nigerian Conflict, Issued in Rome and Geneva, March 20, 1968, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Joint Letter to President Lyndon Johnson sent by the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs, March 22, 1968, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.



belligerents through emphasis on the sacredness of human life and the need to avoid massacre, mass hatred and all forms of atrocities and vindictiveness.

As the conflict showed no sign of ending, the World Council of Churches in a conference held in Uppsala, Sweden in September 1968, revisited the conflict as a humanitarian issue. Peter Odumoso, a civil servant and one of the representatives of Nigeria at the conference, resented “the unsympathetic and chilly reception” accorded to the Nigerian delegation.<sup>102</sup> He observed that the Secretary General of the World Council, Carson Blake, the American Methodists, the British Methodists and the West German churches were sympathetic to the Biafran cause. Only the Scandinavians were said to be relatively open-minded, though they too did not support the Nigerian view. Following the conference, the World Council of Churches published a message that was circulated to all the churches in the world, calling for opposition to government arms supply to the parties in conflict.<sup>103</sup> The World Council of Churches’ decision on arms shipment could be interpreted as anti-Nigerian posture considering that the Nigerian government was the major beneficiary of arms shipments. Odumoso found this message objectionable and observed that there had been an amendment that toned down the Council’s interest in exerting pressure on governments regarding the arms supply question. He was concerned about the outcome of the conference and blamed Nigerian Bishops for a lack of determination in making the Nigerian case.<sup>104</sup> For Odumosu, the attitude of the World

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<sup>102</sup> Memorandum on the World Council of Churches Meeting in Uppsala from the British Consulate, Ibadan to the Commonwealth Office, September 16, 1968, File NAUK, FCO 23/182.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

Council of Churches in supporting Biafra and the cold-shouldering attitude towards Nigeria were politically motivated. He argued that foreign churches were interested in protecting their material interest and referred to them as “imperialist stooges.” He also threatened a hard time for the missionaries whom he said would be regarded with deep suspicion in Nigeria.<sup>105</sup>

The argument that the missionaries were stooges in this context lacked foundation. Christian missionaries did not have any economic investments in Biafra and so had no material interests to protect. Their only investments were churches, schools and hospitals, which were non-profit organizations. If the churches represented any form of imperial interest, they would have supported the federal side that was openly backed by the British, given that the missionaries and the British authorities were arms of the same culture and had collaborated in the civilizing mission in Nigeria. The attitude of the church leaders at Uppsala is better interpreted in terms of Christian humanitarian concerns than either political or economic interest. The presence of Akanu Ibiam, who had access to church leaders around the world by virtue of his position as Vice President of the World Council of Churches, was an advantage to the Biafrans and helped to propagate the Biafran cause.<sup>106</sup> Ibiam’s effort helped to set the tone for other groups which rallied to offer humanitarian support to Biafra.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Nigeria, July 1968, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

## THE JEWISH COMMUNITY

The sympathy for the suffering masses in Biafra stretched across many religious traditions. Motivated by the starvation reports in Biafra, some American Jews engaged in personal, high level lobbying for humanitarian aid.<sup>107</sup> The American Jews saw similarities between what they considered Arab aggression against Israel and identified with the Biafrans against the federal government which they equated with Muslim threat.<sup>108</sup> In October 1968, the president of the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregation, Rabbi Joseph Karasick, called on the United Nations to place relief for the starving Biafrans as an extraordinary item on its agenda.<sup>109</sup> The Jewish leader suggested that the United Nations should provide safe passage for easy delivery of humanitarian aid to Biafra. In what he called “global callousness,” the Rabbi condemned massive silence and indifference of world leaders when thousands of innocent children died of starvation in Biafra. Recounting the massacre of six million Jews under Hitler, Rabbi Karasick proposed: “on this Day of Atonement, let us resolve to lift our voices for the oppressed, for the persecuted and the downtrodden.”<sup>110</sup> The call for relief support for Biafra was preached in the Jewish synagogues across the United States as the Jews marked the Yom Kippur, the most sacred day in the Hebrew calendar.<sup>111</sup> For many in the Jewish community, which had set up American Jewish Emergency Effort for Biafran Relief (AJEEBR), silence,

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<sup>107</sup> Memorandum on “Biafran” Propaganda Effort in the USA, File NAUK, FCO 26/300.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> George Dugan, “Rabbi Here Calls for Aid to Biafrans,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1968, 32.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

indifference and spectatorship to human suffering were cardinal sins in the Jewish value system.

In July 1968, some Irish priests including Tony Byrne (Director Catholic Relief Services in Biafra), Raymond Kennedy of Sao Tome and Fintan Kilbride of Port Harcourt met with Jewish leaders to explain the incidence of mass suffering in Biafra.<sup>112</sup> The pictures of the Biafran children with swollen bellies and match-stick legs were powerful reminders of the photographs of Jews taken in the 1940s at notorious Holocaust sites such as Bergen-Belsen and Dachau. This had a profound effect on members of the Jewish community hence the unanimous decision to channel donations from the Jewish community through Catholic Relief Services and Church World Service as well as through the US Committee for UNICEF.<sup>113</sup> Some Jews in Canada responded to the Biafran starvation in a similar manner. The American Jewish Emergency Effort for Biafran Relief matched their donations with media campaigns to generate more humanitarian support for the war victims.

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<sup>112</sup> Catholic Relief Services, Special Issue: Nigeria/Biafra Relief, Summer Edition, 1968, 13, National Archives Enugu (hereafter NAE) MSP/X6.

<sup>113</sup> Catholic Relief Services, Special Issue: Nigeria/Biafra Relief, Summer Edition, 1968, 13, File NAE MSP/X6.



Figure 1 Source: *New York Times*, August 8, 1968. Sponsored by AJEEBR.

Figure 1 is an example of the advertisements funded by the American Jewish Emergency Effort for Biafran Relief. The advertisements were intended to draw global attention to the conflict and shock readers into taking action. The Jewish organization portrayed children as the major victims of the war, arguing that they were innocent of a world they never made. They also used the slogan, “Thou shall not stand idly by the blood of thy neighbor” in their media advertisements.<sup>114</sup> This slogan is reminiscent of the inaction of

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<sup>114</sup> “Have You Ever Seen Millions of Children Starving to Death?” *New York Times*, August 8, 1968, 12.

the Germans during the Jewish Holocaust in which many neighbors kept silent and watched their Jewish neighbors killed.

Another instance of Jewish identification with the Biafran starvation is evident from the activities of a young Jew, Abie Nathan. For humanitarian reasons, he abandoned his art gallery and restaurant business in Israel and moved to the US to join the campaign to save Biafran civilians who were dying of starvation.<sup>115</sup> Nathan contended that the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria were like the Jews – educated, ambitious, arousing envy and facing “inimical Moslems.”<sup>116</sup> In his campaign for food and drugs in the United States, Nathan paid for a full page advert in *the New York Times* with the caption, “Big Saving While They Last – This is Your Chance to Save Thousands of Biafran Children from Starvation.” The advertisement cost him \$5,600 while it brought \$20,000 in small contributions mainly from college students.<sup>117</sup> Nathan used the money to buy food supplies that were sent to the starving civilians in Biafra.

## **PUBLIC DEMONSTRATIONS**

The horror evoked by the Biafran starvation led to many protests and the emergence of several humanitarian groups. One humanitarian organization that became linked to the Biafran humanitarian cause was a group known as the American Committee to keep Biafra Alive (ACKBA). This organization adopted mass demonstration as a

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<sup>115</sup> Reuben Slonim, “The Incredible Abie Nathan is Biafra’s Moses,” *Telegram*, November 21, 1968.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*

strategy to draw the attention of the American government and the general public to the humanitarian crisis in Biafra. On August 8, 1968, the ACKBA organized a day-long silent march before the United Nations office.<sup>118</sup> About 2,400 demonstrators, mostly young people, lit candles and marched in a circular procession along the tree-lined plaza of 47<sup>th</sup> Street between First and Second Avenue. Some of the protesters carried placards appealing for government and private support as they marched past an eight-foot square poster of starving Biafran children.<sup>119</sup> Paul Connett, the coordinator of ACKBA, stated that his organization was not interested in the political dispute between Nigeria and Biafra. According to Connett, the objective of the protest was to draw the attention of the UN delegates and the American leaders to the suffering of the war victims and the need to organize a massive airlift to alleviate their suffering.<sup>120</sup> The organization also sent telegrams to the UN Secretary General, U. Thant and President Lyndon Johnson to act immediately to save the lives of the masses. The demonstration attracted donations of money, powdered milk, canned food and rice contributed by the protesters and concerned individuals. These donations were sent to Biafra through the United Nations Children's Fund.

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<sup>118</sup> Will Lissner, "Marchers at the UN Urge Action to Save the Starving Biafrans," *New York Times*, August 9, 1968, 2.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

**We can't waste any more time with words.  
Today, let's give up our lunch hours  
and bring Biafra before the United Nations.**



This is August and in Biafra death is doing the talking now. If you have no stomach for starvation, if you have no tolerance for genocide—come to the United Nations today and take your stand. A lifeline will form at 12:30 this afternoon at Dag Hammarskjold Plaza (at 47th Street opposite the U.N.). Please get on it. Please don't leave.

**Today, 12:30 this afternoon.** Let's not eat lunch. Go to the United Nations and let the world know that no American will ever say: "But we didn't know."

**Today, 5:30 this evening.** Let's not go to dinner. Stand before the U.N. Let the world know that you protest the fact that your world is once again witnessing the extinction of an entire people.

**Tonight, 8:30 P.M.** Let's not go to the movies. Let's move the United Nations. Light a candle for the world to see. A candle that says you demand a lifeline for Biafra.

This is August 8th. It may be the most memorable August 8th of your life. For the children of Biafra it will be the last.



**Take your stand on the lifeline for Biafra.**



Figure 2. Source: *New York Times*, August 8, 1968. Sponsored by ACKBA.

About one week after the protest at the UN office, the ACKBA sent a nine-year old girl, Melanie Nix, to Rome on behalf of the starving children in Biafra.<sup>121</sup> Nix, from New Jersey, was accompanied to Rome by Reverend Aloysius Dempsey, a Roman Catholic missionary who had spent twenty one years in Nigeria with a letter from the ACKBA. The nine-year old girl met with Pope Paul VI and asked him to pray for the Biafran children and to write letters to the United Nations and to President Johnson and to send food and medicine to the starving children.<sup>122</sup> The trip served to further publicize the humanitarian crisis in Biafra. In a meeting with Nigerian and Biafran peace negotiators in Addis Ababa in August 1968, Pope Paul VI had appealed for priority attention to be given to the lives of “thousands and thousands of innocent persons menaced by hunger and disease” in Biafra.<sup>123</sup> In a subsequent message to the president of *Caritas Internationalis*, Jean Rodhain, in November 1968, Pope Paul VI expressed his concern for the children whom he described as victims of a “fratricidal drama,” which in their innocence, they could not understand.<sup>124</sup> The Pope further stated that it was for the sake of the children that the church would wish to intercede “with all the strength of our fatherly affection” in

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<sup>121</sup> “Jersey Girl, 9, Seeks Papal Aid for Biafra,” *New York Times*, August 18, 1968, 5.

<sup>122</sup> “Jersey Girl, 9, Asks Pope to Aid Starving Biafrans,” *New York Times*, August 23, 1968, 3.

<sup>123</sup> Robert C. Doty, “Pope Asserts Lives of Biafran People Must be Put First,” *New York Times*, August 13, 1968.

<sup>124</sup> The Pope’s Message to the President of *Caritas Internationalis*, November 1, 1968, File NAUK, FCO 65/305. *Caritas Internationalis* is a confederation of Catholic relief, development and social service organization that caters for the needs of the world’s poor and oppressed.

order to provide them with livelihood and save them from death.<sup>125</sup> The Pope stated that it was necessary to remind people's conscience that human life was sacred and that it was on the basis of the principle of sacred right of human life that he ordered airlifts to Biafra through Caritas despite the risks and exorbitant cost.<sup>126</sup>

Although the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive claimed to be concerned purely with the humanitarian problem in Biafra, its media campaign suggested otherwise. For instance, it printed a booklet with a Biafran logo outlining in question and answer form the major political issues in the conflict.<sup>127</sup> In one of its paid adverts, the organization called for the recognition of Biafra.<sup>128</sup> The organization argued that the attempt to crush Biafra had led to more deaths.<sup>129</sup> The Committee's humanitarian campaign drew attention to the bombing of hospitals and feeding centers and the callous disregard for the consequence of mass starvation by the world community.<sup>130</sup>

Following the lead of the ACKBA, a group of three thousand demonstrators held a prayer service before the United Nations plaza in August 1968. The demonstrators called on member nations and humanitarian groups to send relief supplies to Biafra and save the

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid.

<sup>126</sup> Catholic Relief Services, Special Issue: Nigeria/Biafra Relief, Summer Edition, 1968 7, File NAE MSP/X6.

<sup>127</sup> Peace for Biafra by American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, Inc. November 14, 1969, PCCA, 1973-5005-9-1

<sup>128</sup> "President Nixon, Do you Want "One Nigeria" Over the Bodies of 10 Million People?" *New York Times*, January 21, 1969, 33.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.

endangered lives of innocent children.<sup>131</sup> At the demonstration venue were three children who stood as symbols of the starving children in Biafra. One of the three children was an Igbo girl, Chinwe Odinikpommadu Uddoh, who read a prayer in which she stated: “Simon Peter, feed my lambs, feed my sheep.”<sup>132</sup> This biblical injunction stirred the audience and would become a mobilizing slogan on which JCA’s humanitarian action was hinged.

Similar demonstrations took place in Canada. A group of Canadians and Americans claiming to have lived or studied in West Africa formed a humanitarian group known as the Committee to Aid the Victims of the Nigeria-Biafra War.<sup>133</sup> This group embarked on a public rally in August 1968 to plead for direct and immediate aid to the suffering victims of the tragic war. The Committee suggested joining hands with His Holiness, the Pope to send in relief supplies to the starving people in Biafra.<sup>134</sup> The Committee argued that it was necessary to breach the blockade with food and medicine since it was it was not certain that the dying Biafrans would accept “Gowon’s food.”<sup>135</sup> The Committee also accused the British government of compromising its morality and

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<sup>131</sup> Will Lissner, “1,000 Pray Before UN for Biafran Children,” *New York Times*, August 19, 1968, 3.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> A Protest Letter to the British Prime Minister signed by Professor Dan O. Aronson on behalf of the Committee to Aid the Victims of the Nigeria-Biafra War, August 8, 1968, File NAUK, FCO 38/222.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

deliberately allowing the mass suffering of civilians in Biafra for the sake of “political delicacies.”<sup>136</sup>

In another pro-Biafran demonstration in Montreal, the demonstrators which comprised Canadian sympathizers and Biafran citizens living in Montreal demanded the intervention of the British government in the conflict to reduce the mass deaths arising from the starvation.<sup>137</sup> The Biafran Students’ Union held a similar protest in Copenhagen on July 6, 1968, exactly one year after the outbreak of the war.<sup>138</sup> The demonstrators, who protested at the British and Russian Embassies, blamed the starvation and mass deaths in Biafra on the USSR and Britain.<sup>139</sup> In a letter to the British Prime Minister in July 1968, the Biafran Students’ Union called on the British government to withdraw from its involvement in the war. It argued that the British government was deceiving the world that it was sending relief to the war victims in Biafra whereas it was sending arms that continued to kill thousands of Biafran civilians. The group enjoined the British to play a mediatory role to bring an end to the conflict and ease the suffering of the civilian masses who were dying of hunger.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Memorandum from W. N. Hugh-Jones of the British High Commission, Ottawa to Donald, August 8, 1968, File NAUK, FCO 38/222.

<sup>138</sup> Memorandum from V. E. Beckett of the British Embassy, Copenhagen to Maureen, July 8, 1968, File NAUK, FCO 38/222.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Protest letter from the Biafran Student Union to the British Prime Minister, July 6, 1968, File NAUK, FCO 38/222.

## CONCLUSION

Christian missionary groups in Biafra played an agenda setting role in the humanitarian drive for Biafra. Their initial appeal laid the foundation for large scale international relief operation that followed. In spite of the blockade and poor communication with the outside world, the Christian churches saw it as a duty not to keep silent and watch people die of starvation and disease. They took it upon themselves to alert the world about the Biafran famine through their reports and press conferences which helped to bring the plight of the civilians to the knowledge of the world community. Apart from the role of the missionaries, Biafran government overseas publicist played an important role in awakening the conscience of the global community to the starvation. Markpress, which was Biafra's overseas press agent was effective in drawing the attention of the world to the crisis through its network with the Western newspapers and television stations. Its media campaign in Europe and North America attracted the attention of many journalists who visited Biafra to witness the war. The reports of starving "kwashiorkor children" presented by the Western media moved humanitarian organizations and private individuals to support the humanitarian effort.

Finally and perhaps most significantly, was the role of ordinary people around the world whose demonstrations, vigils, and petitions made the humanitarian crisis in Biafra a global concern. According to Forsyth, these demonstrators were the real heroes of the humanitarian effort.<sup>141</sup> Although the missionaries led the initial campaign, the ordinary citizens, particularly in Western countries kept Biafra in the news and sustained the

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<sup>141</sup> Forsyth, *The Biafran Story*, 194.

humanitarian effort. While the religious groups could be said to have taken the humanitarian campaign to their congregations, the demonstrators took the humanitarian campaign to the streets and influenced public opinion in Europe and North America in favor of Biafra. So effective were the protests that the US State Department reportedly received as many as 25,000 protest letters on Biafra in one day.<sup>142</sup> In addition to demonstration and donations, some of the demonstrators volunteered to go to Biafra and help in alleviating the suffering of the civilian masses. Their efforts also contributed to the formation of the Joint Church Aid which is the focus of the next chapter.

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 241.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **THE JOINT CHURCH AID: FORMATION AND RELIEF ORGANIZATION**

Several humanitarian organizations participated in the delivery of relief aid to the war victims in Biafra. The relief aid was formally organized under two major umbrella bodies - the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the Joint Church Aid (JCA). The JCA was a composite of Catholic and Protestant churches while the ICRC, an established humanitarian agency, relied on donations from many governments, including the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). This chapter does not examine all the bodies that were involved in the humanitarian effort in Biafra. It focuses on the efforts of the JCA as a voluntary humanitarian organization in Biafra with an emphasis on how the humanitarian crisis in Biafra shaped the formation of the JCA. It also examines the pattern of humanitarian intervention and organization of the humanitarian service.

The choice of the JCA as a case study of the humanitarian organizations in the Nigeria-Biafra War is informed by the fact that the JCA remained active in the humanitarian work until the end of the war. Although the ICRC was initially a major provider of humanitarian aid, it withdrew its services after one of its relief planes was shot down by the Nigerian Air Force on June 5, 1969. The JCA's role is particularly interesting because of the debate as to whether humanitarian aid constituted political support for Biafra's "rebellion." The JCA's humanitarian aid was also the first trans-

Atlantic humanitarian intervention involving Protestant and Catholic Churches from different parts of Europe and North America. The JCA foreshadowed the emergence of such present day non-governmental organizations as Church Relief and Development Association (CRDA), Concern Worldwide, and Doctors Without Borders/*Medicins Sans Frontieres* (MSF) that have continued to play significant roles in humanitarian interventions, especially in developing countries. Finally, the JCA provides an appropriate case study because it was free from governmental influence and focused mainly on the war victims in Biafra. The ICRC, on the hand, was covertly influenced by some national governments that provided its funds for the relief operation and had been involved in humanitarian work in both Nigeria and Biafra. These reasons make the JCA an interesting case of study in the international humanitarian work in Biafra. This chapter argues that the JCA's humanitarian effort in Biafra was a success story in view of the large scale support provided for the war victims, its efficient organization and the fact that it was the first emergency humanitarian operation to be carried out by the organization.

## **INTERNATIONAL CHURCH RELIEF AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE JCA**

Humanitarian response to the Biafra famine emerged slowly, mainly due to lack of awareness. Father Anthony Byrne, who organized the first airlift that landed in Port



Harcourt on March 27, 1968, did not initially care about publicity.<sup>1</sup> His primary concern was to begin an airlift that would help mitigate the starvation occasioned by the blockade of Biafra. Byrne's involvement in the relief operation was informed by the report of the papal peace delegate to Biafra in January 1968. The latter reported that about three million people had been displaced in Biafra and that the level of starvation was "horrific."<sup>2</sup> Feeling troubled by the suffering of the mass of the civilian population, Pope Paul VI directed *Caritas Internationalis* to set up a relief program for the war victims.<sup>3</sup> The relief operation had been in progress for some months before the world knew about the starvation crisis in Biafra. Captain Hank Warton, the pilot who was hired by Father Byrne to transport relief to Biafra had barely completed three deliveries to Port Harcourt when the city was captured by the Nigerian Army in May 1968. Following the capture of Port Harcourt, relief flights were resumed at Uli airstrip (Annabelle – the former code name for Uli) within that same month of May 1968.<sup>4</sup> Byrne, with the support of Father Billy Butler, continued to organize intermittent airlifts to Uli airstrip until July 1968 when two West German churches, *Caritas Verband Deutschland* (Catholic) and *Das Diakonische Werk* (Protestant) joined in the airlift. In August 1968, Pastor Viggo Mollerup of the Nordchurchaid weighed in behind them, followed by the Catholic Relief Service of the USA and Canarelief (Canadian relief organization for Biafra). The

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<sup>1</sup> A Tribute to Mark the First Anniversary of the Airlift to Biafra by Raymond F. Kennedy, March 27, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8.

<sup>2</sup> Tony Byrne, *Airlift to Biafra: Breaching the Blockade* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1997), 77 Father Byrne was the Director of Catholic Relief Program to Biafra.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78.

<sup>4</sup> A Tribute to Mark the First Anniversary of the Airlift to Biafra by Raymond F. Kennedy, March 27, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8.

individual efforts of these various church groups, the reports of missionaries in Biafra, the Western media, Markpress and some concerned individuals helped to attract the attention of people in Europe and North America to the plight of the civilian population in Biafra. Hence, the collaboration of different church groups in Europe and North America to send food and medicine to starving Biafran civilians through the nightly airlift.<sup>5</sup> Airlift by night was the only way to send relief to Biafra because the churches' relief operation was not authorized by the Nigerian government.

The relief supplies that were sent to Biafra by the church groups included Norwegian codfish, canned meat, Italian children's camp equipment, Dutch medicines and blood plasma, German hospital serums and high protein foods, butter oil, milk, meat, beans, rice and fish from the United States, Canada and many other countries.<sup>6</sup> The church groups sometimes chartered aircraft owned by Arco, an American company that also flew arms for Biafra.<sup>7</sup> During this period, relief supplies were inadequate to meet the demand in Biafra. In a bid to increase the quantity of relief supplies, the two German church groups, *Caritas Verband Deutschland* and *Das Diakonische Werk* acquired four DC-7 aircraft in July 1968.<sup>8</sup> The German government had donated DM4 million to each

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<sup>5</sup> Progress in Relief Work for Biafra, October 28, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-6-5.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Nordchurchaid: A Report of its operation by the Coordinating Manager, Ingvar Berg, June 10, 1970, 4, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-4. Nordchurchaid (NCA) was a Nordic Church Relief organization formed in August 1968 with the sole aim of flying food and medicine to the war victims in Biafra. Its members included Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.

<sup>8</sup> Nordchurchaid Announces 500<sup>th</sup> Flight in Sao Tome Airlift, October 30, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-6-5.

of the church groups.<sup>9</sup> This donation was facilitated by Byrne whose television interview in Frankfurt emphasized the need for airplanes.<sup>10</sup>

The churches initially sent relief supplies to Biafra through Lisbon. During the months of June, July and August 1968, however, relief supplies meant for Biafra started arriving at Sao Tome, a small island off the coast of western Africa, before moving to Biafra. Various church groups made several attempts to send relief supplies to the civilian victims in Biafra from Sao Tome, but the German churches made the first breakthrough. Although the German churches succeeded in getting the aircraft that made the first flight from Sao Tome, they still faced the challenge of getting capable pilots that could maintain regular flights to Biafra.<sup>11</sup> The pilots were inexperienced and sometimes made mistakes that led to the loss of lives and humanitarian resources. This in turn led to a loss of interest by some of the pilots in the flight operations. In July 1968, for instance, the pilots refused to fly for ten days due to the risk of being shot down by the Nigerian Air Force. The same difficulty confronted Danish and Norwegian church relief organizations that chartered a plane but could not use it for three weeks. *Caritas Verband Deutschland* and *Das Diakonische Werk* had to charter another plane from Transair Sweden, piloted by Captain Carl Gustaf von Rosen who was an internationally renowned pilot.<sup>12</sup> Rosen successfully breached the blockade and delivered his cargo in Biafra.

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<sup>9</sup> Byrne, *Airlift to Biafra*, 88.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 88-90.

<sup>11</sup> Nordchurchaid: A Report of its operation by the Coordinating Manager, Ingvar Berg, June 10, 1970, 4-5, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-4.

<sup>12</sup> Report on the Activities of Nordchurchaid, August 16, 1968- February 15, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-4. Von Rosen played a significant role during the occupation of

Rosen's breakthrough marked a turning point in the relief operations. It led to the formation of a joint ad hoc organization called Nordchurchaid (NCA).<sup>13</sup> The formation of NCA marked the beginning of coordinated relief action in Biafra. When Rosen returned to Sweden, representatives of the Nordic Church Relief Organizations, Folkekirkens Nordhjelp of Denmark, Kirkon Ulkomaanapu of Finland, Norway's Kirkens Nordhjelp, and Lutherhjälpen of Sweden, met in Stockholm and agreed to form Nordchurchaid (NCA), with the sole aim of providing food and medicine to the starving people in Biafra.<sup>14</sup> An agreement of cooperation was concluded on August 26, 1968 by representatives of the four groups. From then, Nordchurchaid collaborated with the German churches on relief supplies.

In August 1968, the German churches and the Nordchurchaid reached an agreement in Malmo, Sweden, for Nordchurchaid to provide staff to coordinate all relief flights from Sao Tome while the German churches were to coordinate the movement of relief supplies from Europe to Sao Tome.<sup>15</sup> Many other agencies also provided supplies but not all were suitable for the emergency airlift. Some items were too heavy and bulky for the aircraft. In September 1968, L Geissel, Director of *Das Diakonische Werk* (DDW) called a meeting in Frankfurt to discuss ways of improving the relief operation in Biafra.

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Ethiopia by Italy in 1936-1941. He flew relief supplies to Ethiopia on behalf of the Red Cross. After the war, Emperor Haile Selassie decorated and commissioned him to organize the Ethiopian Air Force.

<sup>13</sup> Nordchurchaid: A Report of its operation by the Coordinating Manager, Ingvar Berg, June 10, 1970, 4-5, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-4.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Emmanuel Urhobo, *Relief Operation in the Nigerian Civil War*, (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1978), 29. Urhobo was in charge of Christian Council of Nigeria relief operation.

Representatives of various church groups from Biafra outlined the essential requirements needed to alleviate the suffering of the civilian population. These included: protein foods, salt, sugar, carbohydrates, medicines, clothing, and small monetary donations to enable refugees not accommodated in camps to buy food for themselves.<sup>16</sup> The Biafran representatives assured the church groups of the Biafran government guarantee to provide adequate space in the airport for the airlift operation.<sup>17</sup> Participants at the meeting were encouraged to continue with the relief operation but were urged to get clearance from the DDW if their supplies were to be carried by the Nordcurchaid or German churches-operated aircraft.<sup>18</sup> The church groups set up the guideline to ensure that only high priority items such as protein foods, drugs and clothes were accommodated first.

Until November 1968, the number of aircraft available for relief operations was between five and eight. The number of aircraft increased when the church groups enlarged the carrying capacities of the airfields in Sao Tome and Uli, Biafra in October 1968. The enlargement of the airfields, however, did not mean an increase in the tonnage of nightly flights unless bigger Hercules aircraft were used. NCA had to find such large capacity planes. Catholic Relief Service offered to help find such planes in the United States. Other relief organizations such as the World Council of Churches, World Church

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<sup>16</sup> International Relief Supplies for Biafran Refugees, File PCCA, 1973-5005-6-6.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Urhobo, *Relief Operation*, 29.

Service, Catholic Relief Service and the German churches offered to help Nordchurchaid pay the cost of the plane.<sup>19</sup>

In November 1968, the Protestant and Catholic relief agencies organized themselves into a confederation known as Joint Church Aid (JCA).<sup>20</sup> It took the co-operation of church groups from 33 countries to form the Joint Church Aid.<sup>21</sup> The JCA was created following a meeting convened in Rome on November 8-9, 1968 by Monsignor Bayer of *Caritas Internationalis*.<sup>22</sup> The Rome meeting was called to address the issues of technical and economic ways of increasing the volume of airlift to Biafra. Representatives of the church groups at the meeting resolved that a larger rather than a small aircraft was needed for the airlift. This decision was informed by the fact that the airports at Uli (Biafra) and Sao Tome were not large enough to accommodate many aircraft. The Hercules C-130 was suggested as an ideal aircraft for it could carry as much as 20 tons and could easily land in local airports without standard facilities. The church groups also considered Hercules aircraft most suitable because it was equipped to drop supplies by parachute without landing. The cost of leasing the Hercules was one million dollars, and this required representatives of the various church groups to sign a joint contract. This new lease provided a huge boost to the existing aircraft that continued to airlift supplies from Sao Tome to Biafra. The church groups suggested the name, Joint

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<sup>19</sup> Report on the Activities of Nordchurchaid, August 16, 1968- February 15, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-4.

<sup>20</sup> Byrne, *Airlift to Biafra*, 90-91; See also Hugh McCullum, "Biafra: An Obituary," *The United Church Observer*, February 15, 1970, 13.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Urhobo, *Relief Operation*, 29.

Church Aid and it was accepted as the official name of churches' relief operation from Sao Tome to Biafra.<sup>23</sup> The various church groups at the meeting in Rome shared responsibilities for running the new group based on the existing understanding and cooperation among the humanitarian agencies. *Das Diakonische Werk* was to coordinate relief supplies; Nordchurchaid was in charge of airlift and technical questions while passenger coordination was managed by *Caritas Internationalis*. Press information and international relations fell under the control of Catholic Relief Services.<sup>24</sup>

Joint Church Aid was the official name of the humanitarian organization but the pilots hired by the church groups called it "The Jesus Christ Airline."<sup>25</sup> Each of the planes that operated under the umbrella of the JCA had a JCA logo – two fish, one of the earliest symbols of Christianity.<sup>26</sup> The JCA was also supported by the American Jewish Community under the umbrella of the American Jewish Emergency Effort for Biafran Relief.<sup>27</sup> As of November 1968, the Jewish organization through its chairman, Morris B. Abram, had committed a total of \$38,000 in support of the JCA's humanitarian effort.<sup>28</sup> An official of the American Jewish Committee was a member of the US arm of the Joint Church Aid that received aircraft from the US government.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Urhobo, *Relief Operation*, 30.

<sup>25</sup> Hugh McCullum, "Remembering the Nightmare of Biafra," *Presbyterian Record*, 2004, 22.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Catholic Relief Services: Press Briefing, January 9, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-5.

<sup>28</sup> Biafra Famine Crisis Remains Extremely Critical, November 5, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-6-5.

<sup>29</sup> Catholic Relief Services: Press Briefing, January 9, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-5.

Although JCA was the “working name” of the composite group of churches that came together for the purpose of bringing emergency relief to Biafra, it had no written agreement, no permanent staff or headquarters, no common contribution and no funds.<sup>30</sup> Various agencies took care of their own expenses. The organization only served as an umbrella that facilitated smooth and coordinated relief delivery to the war victims in Biafra. Initially, the JCA did not even have an executive working committee that could steer its affairs. Although the need for a steering committee was pointed out at the JCA’s conference in Copenhagen on January 30-31, 1969, it was not considered an urgent concern. On June 9-10, 1969, however, representatives of the groups that constituted the JCA held a conference in Lucerne in which an Executive Working Group (EWG) was finally set up.<sup>31</sup> Members of this working committee included: *Caritas Internationalis*, DDW, Canarelief (Canada), JCA-USA, the Catholic Relief Services and the Nordchurchaid. The main goal of the executive working committee was to discuss issues concerning policies and operational details regarding relief delivery. These issues included negotiating for peace between the warring parties, ensuring absolute neutrality of the airlift, increasing the capacity of the airlift and the possibility of securing daylight flights.<sup>32</sup> The group negotiated with governments and the International Committee of the Red Cross regarding relief delivery arrangements. In addition, they discussed the scheduling of shipping, number and type of aircraft that could be accommodated in Sao

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<sup>30</sup> Nordchurchaid: A Report of its operation by the Coordinating Manager, Ingvar Berg, June 10, 1970, 29, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-4.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.



Tome, handling of supplies and crew salaries and bonuses. The EWG met a total of nine times before the JCA wound up its operation in Biafra.

Despite the absence of formal structures in the JCA operations, the participating groups showed an extraordinary understanding and co-operation that enabled them to overcome the obstacles that confronted the humanitarian operations. The JCA members were, however, united by a Biblical principle that was frequently invoked in the organization's publicity materials: "I was hungry you gave me food... I was naked and you clothed me... I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me."<sup>33</sup> Members of the constituent church groups saw themselves as people who were carrying out a divine law of caring for the needy. It was this common understanding of carrying out a divine injunction given by Jesus Christ that made it possible for the various church groups to bury their theological differences to pursue the common goal of saving lives and alleviating the human suffering arising from the humanitarian crisis.

By January 1969, more than 1,000 night time flights brought over 10,000 tons of food and medicines to Biafra under the churches' emergency program. The initial success may be attributed to the courage of the German and Scandinavian churches that persisted in organizing flying missions into Biafra despite threats from the Nigerian government.<sup>34</sup>

By the time the humanitarian relief operations got under way in September 1968, nearly a

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<sup>33</sup> Biafra, a Nation of Human Beings in Need, An Appeal for Support Sent by the Secretary of World Council of Churches Refugee Relief, Biafra, June 18, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8. For more information, see the *Holy Bible*, Matthew Chapter 25: 35-40 and Isaiah 58: 10.

<sup>34</sup> Other Joint Church Aid Members, Memorandum from the German Evangelical Church Delegate for Biafran Relief to E. H. Johnson, Overseas Secretary, Presbyterian Church in Canada, October 28, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-7.

million people had reportedly died as a result of starvation, malnutrition and diseases.<sup>35</sup>

Charles E. Goodell, who organized the Biafra Study Mission – a team of experts in the field of nutrition, tropical medicine, agriculture and African affairs that visited Nigeria and Biafra in February 1969 – ascertained, based on his team’s investigation that an “absolute minimum” of 1,000,000 Biafrans had died from starvation-related diseases.<sup>36</sup>

His team also reported that if massive relief aid was not brought into Biafra, about 1,000,000 more people would die of starvation and malnutrition. Goodell’s report corroborated Byrne’s earlier statement at a conference in New York on July 18, 1968, in which he stated that thousands of civilians in Biafra were starving to death. Byrne reported that children could get only one good meal in every three weeks and as a result, had resorted to eating flies and scraping the ground for worms in the hope of finding something to eat.<sup>37</sup> Father Byrne asserted that the risky nightly flights remained the only way the food crisis could be alleviated until the warring parties found a political solution to the conflict. The gruesome description of the condition of the war victims reported in newspapers and broadcast on the radio across the United States attracted sympathy from many concerned individuals, foundations and humanitarian agencies.

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<sup>35</sup> World Council of Churches Refugee Relief Report, December 1, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8. The number of deaths as a result of starvation and malnutrition rose up to two million. See Caritas International Defines Policy on Child Relief in Biafra, October 31, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-1-14.

<sup>36</sup> Charles E. Goodell, “Biafra and the American Conscience,” *Saturday Review*, April 12, 1969, 26. Goodell served on a senate committee that investigated malnutrition in the US. The team of nutrition and medical experts he led to Nigeria and Biafra in February 1969 included Jean Mayer, the Harvard University nutritionist.

<sup>37</sup> Catholic Relief Services, Nigeria-Biafra Relief, Summer Edition 1968, 2, File National Archives Enugu (hereafter NAE) MPS/X6.

Following Byrne's press briefing, the Catholic Relief Services organized an emergency airlift of high-protein food from JFK International Airport in New York on July 26, 1968. Three days later, the Catholic Relief Services shipped 262 tons of food, clothing and medicines valued at \$123,853 to the island of Sao Tome. This shipment included cartons of baby foods and cereals, infant milk formulae, fish protein concentrate, non-fat dry milk, canned meat, whole egg powder, salt, multi-purpose food, antibiotics, vitamins, bandages and other surgical dressing and baby clothes.<sup>38</sup> The protein foods brought in by the humanitarian agencies helped to alleviate the starvation and reduce the high death rate among nursing mothers, expectant mothers and children.<sup>39</sup>

When relief operations fully commenced in September and October 1968, the humanitarian agencies agreed that attention should be primarily focused on the kwashiorkor (protein deficiency disease) patients, children, expectant and feeding mothers and refugees, especially those in camps.<sup>40</sup> The decision to pay more attention to the children and expectant mothers was based on a report that undernourishment could cause permanent brain damage and physical defects among young children.<sup>41</sup> The fear of having a very large population of Biafran children mentally or physically impaired as a result of mass starvation led some prominent Americans such as Pat Nixon (the wife of

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<sup>38</sup> Catholic Relief Services, Nigeria-Biafra Relief, Summer Edition 1968, 2, File NAE MPS/X6.

<sup>39</sup> Progress Report from Reverend G. E. Igwe (Organising Secretary, World Council of Churches Refugee Relief) and His Assistant, K. Reijnierse to Pastor V. Mollerup, General Secretary Nordchurchaid, January 27, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8.

<sup>40</sup> World Council of Churches Refugee Relief in Biafra, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8.

<sup>41</sup> Charles E. Goodell, "Biafra and the American Conscience," *Saturday Review*, April 12, 1969, 26.

Richard Nixon), Archbishop Terence Cook, Senator Jacob Javits, Mayor John Lindsay and Charles Goodell to support the churches' relief effort by embarking on what Goodell described as "mercy collection" at St Patrick's Cathedral in New York.<sup>42</sup> Fear that malnutrition would damage children's physical and mental health was well founded. Post-war research carried out on people born before, during and after the war in the Biafran region has shown that babies born during the period of intense famine in Biafra have grown up to be more susceptible to diseases such as obesity, high blood pressure, and blood glucose.<sup>43</sup>

Focusing on children, patients, nursing mothers and camped refugees in the relief distribution also became an effective way of handling the limited quantity of relief supplies that were available. These non-combatant groups received priority attention because of their low resistance to disease attacks.<sup>44</sup> From December 1968 onwards, however, it became obvious that the population as a whole needed relief. Men and women were increasingly looking thinner and were also dying of hunger. Some people could not get a meal a day. Workers' productivity became very low, and even those who had money could not find food to buy. Inflation caused by the war had drastically reduced the value of the Biafran currency. The persistent shortage of food and Biafran government

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Donald G. McNeil Jr, "Nigeria: Those Born During Biafra Famine Are More Susceptible to Obesity," *International New York Times*, November 1, 2010, accessed on March 5, 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/02/health/02global.html?>

<sup>44</sup> "Why They Starve," *The World* (no date)

expenditure contributed largely to the hyperinflation in Biafra.<sup>45</sup> The price of a three pound chicken was £8 (nearly \$20) while a “leg of goat” sold for £15. A cup of garri (cassava flour, a staple, which Biafrans could easily get pre-war) cost a pound compared to the prewar price of 10 cups a shilling. A third of a cup of salt on the other hand sold for nearly half a pound while the average monthly salary of a soldier or a civil servant during this period was £15.<sup>46</sup> The inflation affected other staple foods including yam, plantain and maize. The starvation problem was so severe that some people resorted to going to the market place to scavenge for seeds of breadfruit that dropped from the sellers’ basins. Many people became beggars and frequently fell and died from starvation at markets and along the road.<sup>47</sup>

Faced with the problem of starvation in the wider population, the humanitarian organizations decided to extend the relief distribution to the needy and destitute wherever they could be found. Nevertheless, the quantity of relief given was determined by the degree of need. Those whose cases were considered severe received more supplies whereas those whose cases were mild got less food, just enough for subsistence. The extension of the relief to the larger population was made possible by the increased flights of the relief planes from February 1969. This spread in distribution helped reduce the rate of deaths by starvation.

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<sup>45</sup> “Prices in Biafra Soar 400% in Two Years of War; Aide in Besieged Area Says Airlifts Ease Shortages of Some Commodities,” *New York Times*, September 25, 1969, 8.

<sup>46</sup> “Letter from Biafra,” *The New Yorker*, October 4, 1969.

<sup>47</sup> Progress Report from Reverend G. E. Igwe (Organising Secretary, World Council of Churches Refugee Relief) and His Assistant, K. Reijnierse, to Pastor V. Mollerup, General Secretary Nordchurchaid, January 27, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8.

## **RELIEF ORGANIZATION AND DISTRIBUTION**

### **Food**

The JCA's relief supplies from different churches in Europe and North America were centrally coordinated by a consortium of Catholic and Protestant relief agencies with an operational base in Sao Tome, an island in the Gulf of Guinea. The Catholic Church operated under the general umbrella of the *Caritas Internationalis* while the Protestant Churches were organized under the auspices of the World Council of Churches. The strategic role of Sao Tome, the former Portuguese West African Island, earned it the nickname, "Mercy Island."<sup>48</sup> When relief supplies were brought into Uli Airport (Biafran airport) from Sao Tome, they were moved to the WCC central stores at Awo-Omanma, near Uli airport and the Caritas' central stores located at Ihioma. The JCA had two relief distribution networks in Biafra. The Protestant Churches had a provincial distribution system while the Catholic Church under Caritas adopted a diocesan method of distribution.<sup>49</sup> In the Protestant (World Council of Churches) provincial system, relief supplies at the central stores were distributed among representatives of the various provinces in Biafra. The distribution according to provinces was based on the existing provinces created by then Colonel Ojukwu in December 1966.<sup>50</sup> The provincial stores

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<sup>48</sup> Other JCA Members, Joint Church Aid/USA Publishes Progress Report, September 20, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-5.

<sup>49</sup> Instructions for WCC Provincial Representatives by H. J. Middlekoop, August 1, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8.

<sup>50</sup> Secession of Eastern Region from Nigeria, File NAUK, FCO 25/232. The Provincial Administration Edict of June 1, 1967 also known as Edict No 27 of 1967 was an amended version of the already existing provincial administration system in the former Eastern Region.

further distributed the supplies to the refugee camps, feeding centers, sick bays and hospitals using 5-ton trucks. In refugee camps, food was distributed to registered refugees through the camp-committees. At the feeding centers, three cooked meals were distributed to all children, pregnant women, nursing mothers and destitute in the villages. The feeding centers provided protein food for both the registered and non-registered refugees who needed more protein.<sup>51</sup> Caritas distributed its supplies through the diocesan representatives, the clergy, who managed diocesan stores.<sup>52</sup> The Diocesan representatives then distributed to the Parishes which were managed by the Catholic priests.

In each of the provinces, relief activities centered on the provincial secretary who was assisted by a refugee worker. The provincial secretary served as the central coordinator of all the refugee work in the province.<sup>53</sup> He liaised with a refugee committee which also had representation from the World Council of Churches, the International Committee of the Red Cross and Caritas. The provincial secretary provided regular and up-to-date records of the refugee camps, their numbers and the population of each camp. The secretary also provided record of the number of hospitals, sick bays, and orphanages for refugee children, kwashiorkor clinics and the number of patients that attended or were admitted in them. It was the duty of the secretary to ensure that the Biafran Ministry of Health nurses and doctors assigned to the refugee camps did the jobs for which they drew

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<sup>51</sup> Progress Report from Reverend G. E. Igwe (Organising Secretary, World Council of Churches Refugee Relief) and His Assistant, K. Reijnierse, to Pastor V. Mollerup, General Secretary Nordchurchaid, January 27, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8.

<sup>52</sup> Instructions for WCC Provincial Representatives by H. J. Middlekoop, August 1, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

supplies. Although the provincial secretary was primarily responsible for keeping such information, the members of the committee also kept their own records. The records provided key data and information that was used in the allocation of relief goods.

An important attribute of church humanitarianism during this period was the understanding and co-operation between the World Council of Churches and Caritas in relief distribution. This helped minimize duplication and overlapping of services.<sup>54</sup> Both organizations sometimes pooled their relief supplies and worked together in relief distribution in order to increase their reach and impact. However, the level of co-operation enjoyed by the two church groups sometimes depended on the individuals involved. Ron McGraw, a provincial representative under the WCC in Aba, Port Harcourt and Anang Provinces noted that it was sometimes difficult to work out an arrangement with some Catholic priests, especially Irish.<sup>55</sup> McGraw, however, pointed out that this was not true of all Catholic priests and that the level of cooperation often depended on individual priests. Certain general patterns were evident in relief distribution. Whereas the Protestants under the Joint Church Aid were prepared to distribute relief to everyone regardless of church denomination, some Catholic priests insisted on working through their parish priests who ultimately decided who received relief supplies. This form of duality in relief distribution network suggests that some people might have received more

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<sup>54</sup> Alex Zeidman, "For Six Eventful Months, I helped to Feed Biafrans," *Presbyterian Record*, June 1969, 8-10.

<sup>55</sup> Ron McGraw, Oral Interview, February 21, 2012, Niagara-on-the-Lake. Ron was a chemistry teacher at Hope Waddell Institute, Calabar from 1960 till the outbreak of the war. He and his wife voluntarily served as Relief Representative for the WCC under the Joint Church Aid in Biafra. Ron was in charge of Aba, Port Harcourt and Anang provinces.



protein supply than they needed whereas those who acutely needed protein to survive did not get the required quantity.

Biafran government officials were unhappy about the way some priests handled the relief distribution, but could do nothing to change it. The government was disinclined to intervene in the matter probably because it did not want to be seen as being in conflict with the humanitarian agencies. It is also likely that the Biafran leader, Ojukwu, tolerated this method because African Concern, an Irish organization that flew in relief shipments from Gabon sometimes allowed their planes to be chartered to convey arms and military supplies.<sup>56</sup> Since the Irish priests had some control over African Concern, the Biafran government might have found it difficult to challenge the conduct of some of the Irish priests.

As of June 15, 1968, Biafra had a total of 688 refugee camps organized in the provinces with a total of 482,923 refugees.<sup>57</sup> This figure represents only the displaced persons who were initially fed by the Biafran government. By December 1969, the World Council of Churches alone provided food for 1,757 refugee camps with a total of 1,552,000 persons.<sup>58</sup> The WCC also had a total of 1,536 feeding centers that provided food for 951,000 persons including children and adults.<sup>59</sup> By comparison, Caritas had a total of

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<sup>56</sup> Ron McGraw, Oral Interview, February 21, 2012.

<sup>57</sup> Rehabilitation Commission: Notes on the Management of Refugee Camps, Republic of Biafra, Circular No 1, July 10, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-9-2.

<sup>58</sup> World Council of Churches Refugee Relief Report, December 1, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-5-10.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

1,437 feeding centers servicing a population of 1,242,540 persons.<sup>60</sup> With the two distribution networks, relief organizations were able to achieve effective distribution of relief foods and clothes to the population within two days after arrival in the country.<sup>61</sup> On the average, meals were supplied at the feeding centers only twice per week.<sup>62</sup> Commenting on the infrequent food supply and distribution pattern, a Caritas official observed that the number of people that they attended to at their feeding centers was not regulated by the hunger of their own (Caritas officials') children but by the meager supplies available at the stores to feed them.<sup>63</sup> This meant that people only got food when it was available for distribution. However, the church groups gave special consideration to children and mothers who were admitted in sickbays and hospitals with severe kwashiorkor by providing them with a full diet.<sup>64</sup> The pressure of food demand increased when the International Committee of the Red Cross supply was halted following the shooting down of their relief plane on June 5, 1969. ICRC could not make further deliveries, and the JCA intervened by initially providing ICRC's representatives in Biafra with one-tenth of its daily supplies to cater for their hospitals and sickbay.<sup>65</sup> As the famine crisis got worse, feeding centers and sick bays that were formerly managed by the

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<sup>60</sup> Other JCA Members, Catholic and Catholic Relief Services: Caritas Biafra, General Report, December 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-6.

<sup>61</sup> World Council of Churches Refugee Relief, Memorandum from the Organizing Secretary, WCC to the UNICEF, September 30, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8.

<sup>62</sup> Other JCA Members, Catholic and Catholic Relief Services: Caritas Biafra, General Report, December 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-6.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Progress Report from Reverend G. E. Igwe (Organising Secretary, World Council of Churches Refugee Relief) and His Assistant, K. Reijnierse, to Pastor V. Mollerup, General Secretary Nordchurchaid, January 27, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8.

<sup>65</sup> World Council of Churches Relief Report, December 1, 1969, 5, File PCCA, 1973-5005-5-10.

Red Cross had to be handed over to the Caritas and WCC. The assumption of these new responsibilities was not matched by a corresponding increase in food or medical supplies.

It is important, however, to point out that the Joint Church Aid collaborated with the Biafra government to set up refugee camps and feeding centers.<sup>66</sup> The government of Biafra established an eleven-member Rehabilitation Commission entrusted with the responsibility of caring for refugees within Biafra, in addition to those that fled back to Biafra from Nigeria after the 1966 massacres.<sup>67</sup> The Rehabilitation Commission was chaired by a Biafran civil servant, S. E. Imoke with R.E. Odinkemelu as its secretary. It had representatives from the major humanitarian organizations including *Caritas Internationalis*, World Council of Churches and International Committee of the Red Cross.<sup>68</sup> The Commission appointed resident commissioners who were charged with the responsibility of monitoring and evaluating the activities of the provincial refugee committee. The resident commissioners, who were six in number, provided weekly progress report on the refugee camps and suggested ways of improving the care and welfare of the refugees. Although the JCA members collaborated with the Biafran government in setting up refugee camps, they maintained their organization's established policy on relief distribution. For instance, the JCA members could not allow the Biafran

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<sup>66</sup> M. J. Middelkoop's Letter to E. G. R. Hayward in UNICEF, New York, September 30, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8. Middelkoop was the Organizing Secretary of World Council of Churches Refugee Relief in Biafra.

<sup>67</sup> Rehabilitation Commission: Notes on the Management of Refugee Camps in the Republic of Biafra, Circular No. 1, July 10, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-9-2.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

government or its agents to distribute relief materials.<sup>69</sup> They insisted on carrying out the distribution to ensure that the relief materials reached the people for whom they were meant. In extreme cases of malnutrition, the refugee camp directors appointed by the Biafran government could report to the JCA for intervention or send the report to the Rehabilitation Commission who in turn approached the JCA for aid. However, sending such a report to the JCA or channeling it to the Rehabilitation Commission was not common because the JCA also had its own personnel on ground and so could easily identify emergency cases.<sup>70</sup>

For the entire period of humanitarian assistance, the Joint Church Aid relied on missionaries who were already in Biafra for the organization and distribution of the relief aid. Most of these missionaries were Catholics with a population of 424 out of the 904 foreign priests in Nigeria before the war began.<sup>71</sup> Missionary support for relief activities relied on established institutions of the church. Provincial and diocesan representatives kept records of supplies they received from each donating body. There was a biweekly meeting of the JCA members in which Caritas and WCC leaders reminded the relief representatives of two things: first, how grateful Biafrans were for the relief supplies that were provided for them; secondly, the urgent need for increased relief supplies.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Paul Ndukwe, Oral Interview, July 2, 2011. Ndukwe, an agriculturist, was a camp director in Abam.

<sup>71</sup> Official Catholic Directory, 1965, File NAUK, FCO /23/182. This was the figure as of 1965. The number might have increased since missionaries were still active in Nigeria until the war broke out.

<sup>72</sup> Alex Zeidman, "For Six Eventful Months, I helped to Feed Biafrans," *Presbyterian Record*, June 1969, 8-10.

Reverend Alex Zeidman, who volunteered for humanitarian services in Biafra, noted that apart from the relief supplies that were provided, Biafran Christians were grateful that the church overseas had not forgotten them.<sup>73</sup>

The practical aspects of relief distribution involved both humanitarian groups and the government. The humanitarian agencies engaged the services of over three hundred 5-ton commercial trucks to distribute relief food to the various provinces. The trucks were privately owned but were commandeered by the Biafran government for relief distribution.<sup>74</sup> The truck owners were paid by the humanitarian agencies under an arrangement whereby the humanitarian agencies exercised control over the trucks and the supplies without undue interference from the Biafran government. Nevertheless, there was an understanding that the Biafran government could withdraw the trucks for its use when it needed them. Such situations temporarily reduced the flow of relief distribution.<sup>75</sup>

In addition to providing trucks, the Biafran government supplied petrol for the transportation of food. The government had a local petrol refinery, but it could not produce enough to meet the daily demand of the Joint Church Aid. From the month of October 1969, for example, the Biafran government could only supply about 6% of the petrol needed by the relief agencies.<sup>76</sup> Petrol supply from the local source might have dropped during this period due to the encroachment of Nigerian troops. Bad roads,

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ron McGraw, Oral Interview, February 21, 2012.

<sup>75</sup> Other JCA Members, Catholic and Catholic Relief Services: Caritas Biafra, General Report, December 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-6.

<sup>76</sup> World Council of Churches Refugee Relief Report, December 1, 1969, 3, File PCCA, 1973-5005-5-10.

especially during the rainy season could have also affected supply as heavy trucks could not easily ply the muddy slippery roads. Following the uncertainty in the petrol supply, the humanitarian agencies made an arrangement in November 1969 to fly in 467 drums of petrol per month, pending an improvement in local supplies.<sup>77</sup>

Apart from petrol, the Biafran government provided storage facilities for relief supplies. Most of the food stores were school buildings and town halls. The government also contributed to the relief effort by providing and paying for all the staff in the refugee camps. While the government managed the refugee staff, the humanitarian agencies were solely responsible for relief provision and distribution.<sup>78</sup> In spite of this dependency on the government for certain functions, the church humanitarian agencies were still largely able to maintain their operational independence. Officials of these church relief groups were aware of the perception on the Nigerian side that humanitarian agencies were sympathetic to the Biafran cause. Church relief officials were therefore keen to be seen as independent actors.

Conscious of the fact that food supplies from the humanitarian agencies could not meet the local need and could be interrupted at any time by the threats of the Nigerian Air Force, the church groups decided to break the food importation bottleneck by setting up an agricultural program to boost carbohydrate and protein food production. This program was initiated by the Protestant church groups through four expatriate agriculturalists.<sup>79</sup> A

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ron McGraw, Oral Interview, February 21, 2012.

<sup>79</sup> World Council of Churches Refugee Relief Report, December 1, 1969, 1-2, File PCCA, 1973-5005-5-10.

number of agricultural projects were started and supervised by the agriculturalists, but more emphasis was placed on encouraging the local farmers to expand their farm work by cultivating a second type of crop in areas where only one crop had traditionally been grown. One such agricultural project was a large scale rice-growing project initiated by the World Council of Churches and the Scandinavian Church organizations in Biafra.<sup>80</sup>

According to the reports of D. R. E. Jackson and W.A. Ferguson (coordinators of the rice project in Biafra), a total of 130 acres of land was used for the rice project.<sup>81</sup> The church groups spent a total of £5,000 on the project outside the cost of labor.<sup>82</sup> The expatriates also distributed seeds to farmers and also provided them with hand tools. In order to sustain the JCA agricultural project, the Biafran government, through the Food Directorate, provided a large quantity of rice seeds to the farmers. According to Paul Ndukwe, an agriculturist and refugee camp director, the Directorate of Food Production inherited a large quantity of rice seeds from the former Eastern Nigeria Development Corporation, and this existing reserve helped to support the JCA's agricultural project.<sup>83</sup> The JCA members also made efforts to bring in different seeds suitable for planting at different seasons. Col. Ojukwu regarded the JCA's food program as a "bonus to the food program" that the Biafran government set up under the Directorate of Food Production.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> "Ojukwu's View of the War," *West Africa*, February 15, 1969, 197.

<sup>81</sup> Rice Growing Project in Biafra: Second Progress Report, by D. R. E Jackson and W. A. Ferguson, January 27, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> Paul Ndukwe, Oral Interview, Oral Interview, June 30, 2011. Ndukwe was a refugee camp director at Abam. He was also part of the rice project at Ndi-Oji Abam.

<sup>84</sup> "Red Cross Crisis," *West Africa*, January 25, 1969, 109.

The JCA's agricultural program propelled the Biafran government to embark on an aggressive agricultural project through a scheme known as "land army."<sup>85</sup> The Biafran government drafted young people between the ages of 12 and 17 into the land army to grow food under the "dig-for-victory" slogan.<sup>86</sup> The Directorate of Food Production which was in charge of the project initiated some schemes such as loans and other incentives to encourage local food production.<sup>87</sup> It also emphasized increased production of vegetable proteins and cereals, especially beans, groundnuts, rice and maize. In addition, the directorate encouraged poultry farming. It devised a "do-it-yourself" formula that encouraged farmers to improvise a chicken feed formula based on locally produced oil seeds, carbohydrates, vegetables and minerals.<sup>88</sup> These initiatives were promoted at the highest levels of the Biafran government as integral to the war efforts. In a seminar on emergency food production held at Umuahia in January 1969, Ojukwu stated that the government "will mount the assault against the challenge of starvation regarded by our enemy as a legitimate tool of war."<sup>89</sup> The collaborative effort of the JCA and the Biafran Government Food Directorate to intensify local food production helped to supplement the supplies from the relief agencies. On many occasions when the imported relief supplies were in short supply due to transportation or other challenges, local farmers and the sickbay land army (formed by sick children and their parents) contributed food to support

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<sup>85</sup> Rice Growing Project in Biafra: Second Progress Report, by D. R. E Jackson and W. A. Ferguson, January 27, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8 .

<sup>86</sup> "Red Cross Crisis," *West Africa*, January 25, 1969, 109.

<sup>87</sup> Nwokolo, *Biafran Refugees*, 28-29.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> "Red Cross Crisis," *West Africa*, January 25, 1969, 109.



the feeding camps and clinics until more supplies from the JCA arrived.<sup>90</sup> The effect of this local contribution to humanitarian aid was the elimination of long-term dependence on external aid after the suspension of the JCA aid on January 12, 1970. It was largely to the credit of the Nordchurchaid and WCC that that the agricultural program succeeded.<sup>91</sup>

The fact that the extended activities of humanitarian groups in Biafra did not lead to long-term aid dependence as was the case in some other conflicts shows the uniqueness of the Biafra context and the organizational and operational approaches adopted by humanitarian groups in Biafra. The success of the JCA's agricultural program lay largely in the fact that the organization did not see the relief effort as a self-perpetuating undertaking. The mobilization of local resources in the agricultural program suggests a conscious effort to stimulate agricultural development rather than inhibiting it through overdependence on the airlift.

Apart from the JCA's common intervention schemes, Caritas offered two other services that were not covered by the WCC. These provided food and medical care for orphanages and prisons. There were a total of 42 orphanages supported by Caritas with a total enrolment of 3,350 inmates. The term "orphan" in the war situation was broadly used to describe children whose parents were known to be dead or could not be traced. It

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<sup>90</sup> Progress Report no. 2, March 4-14 by Pastor Kuhl, March 15, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-7. See also Document Handed Over to Mr G. Murray on Thursday, March 28, 1968 at the Meeting of Christian Council of Biafra held in Owerri, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8.

<sup>91</sup> World Council of Churches Refugee Relief Report, December 1, 1969, 1-2, File PCCA, 1973-5005-5-10.

was also used for children whose parents or relatives could not provide food for.<sup>92</sup> In addition, Caritas extended relief services to Biafra's 12 prisons which had 4,000 inmates. The inmates included common law prisoners, detainees and prisoners of war. Caritas personnel regularly visited the prisons to ensure proper food distribution.

### **Medical Service**

Medical services followed the same pattern as the food distribution. The WCC followed the provincial system while Caritas remained diocesan. Caritas operated 12 hospitals with a monthly average of 44,980 patients, 75 sick bays with a monthly average of 12,520 patients, 47 outpatient department clinics with a monthly average of 969,354 patients, 30 maternity clinics, 42 orphanages and 12 prisons with 4,000 inmates.<sup>93</sup> The WCC on the other hand, supported approximately 100 sick bays caring for approximately 7,500 patients, 5 hospitals with a total of about 700 beds averaging over 1,500 admissions and 30,000 outpatient visits per month.<sup>94</sup> The WCC also organized 5 mobile clinic teams, 2 of which were directed by physicians while 3 were under the direction of senior nurses.

Throughout the war, the major medical problem in Biafra remained malnutrition. The Joint Church Aid airlifts were only able to supply one-third of the minimal essential supplements needed to prevent starvation amid the continued deterioration of the general

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<sup>92</sup> Other JCA Members, Catholic and Catholic Relief Services: Caritas Biafra, General Report, December 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-6.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> World Council of Churches Refugee Relief Report, December 1, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-5-10.

nutritional status of millions of people in the war affected areas.<sup>95</sup> Independent surveys using limited sampling methods and the observations of experienced medical personnel in Biafra showed a widespread and severe state of nutritional deficiency of almost the entire population. Only the populace of a few geographical areas unaffected by the war appeared to have maintained relative good health for some time. As the war lingered, the nutritional reserve of these people was dissipated, reducing them to the same level of malnutrition as other war affected areas. Top on the list of medical problems in Biafra included severe anemia, malaria and respiratory infections (pneumonia and bronchitis). Also very common but less serious conditions were scabies, intestinal parasitic infestations, non-specific diarrheas and fevers of undiagnosed cause. Tuberculosis, which is sometimes associated with malnutrition and crowded living conditions, constituted a threat. Measles, a perennial problem among children was found to be a big health challenge.<sup>96</sup>

Ninety per cent of the patients in the sick bays were children under the age of ten. These children suffered different forms of malnutrition, kwashiorkor (protein deficiency disease) and marasmus (general undernourishment).<sup>97</sup> Protein deficiency produced kwashiorkor with other attendant diseases to which the population was particularly vulnerable in its weakened condition. Calorie deficiency on the other hand, led to marasmus and more vulnerability to disease attacks. Most of these children suffered from

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Medical Activities Report for August 1969 by E. T. O'Dell, Medical Secretary, September 5, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-6-7.

severe anemia (hemoglobin less than 50%; in some cases 20-30%) while a large number had malaria, intestinal parasites, small pox, measles, tuberculosis, severe respiratory problems and other infectious diseases.<sup>98</sup> Children, pregnant women, nursing mothers and the elderly who did not die directly of starvation, died from anemia, measles, small pox, tuberculosis and respiratory diseases.

Measles was initially common but was effectively controlled through immunization. A weekly report on immunization shows that 824, 631 children up to 5 years old received measles immunization between the months of January and August 1969, while 2,131,517 persons received small pox immunization within the same period.<sup>99</sup> Bacillus Calmette Guerin (BCG) vaccination against tuberculosis started on August 25, 1969. According to the Immunization administrator, A. G. Saville, the first week of the BCG vaccination recorded an impressive start. 4,479 children under two years of age received the vaccination while 34,137 persons between 2 and 20 years old turned up for the vaccination. Severely ill children were evacuated to hospitals, if they were nearby. The remaining 10% of the sick bay inmates were adults. These were people who also suffered from severe nutritional deficiency. Most sick bays held regular outpatient clinics for mild cases. Most of the in-patients in the sick bays received three meals per day even though there were no special food supplies available for sick bays. All food for patients' meal had to be taken from the general food allocation of the area

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> World Council of Churches, Extract of Weekly Report on Immunization, August 30, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-6-7.

concerned.<sup>100</sup> Many of the children in the sick bays recovered quickly after being fed with high-protein foods supplied by the relief agencies.

In some cases, however, the medical conditions of certain children were too bad to be managed within the facilities in Biafra. Some sick children who needed blood transfusion and intensive care were flown to Gabon and Sao Tome where Caritas and *Das Diakonische Werk* had established a rehabilitation centre for children with critical health issues. Caritas and the Protestant Churches' relief organizations collaborated in this project. *Secours Catholique France* organized a similar program in Gabon.<sup>101</sup> *Caritas Internationalis* provided \$250,000 for food, lodging and medical care for the evacuated Biafran children. Rhena Eckett Schweitzer, daughter of Albert Schweitzer, the famous physician noted for his medical missionary work in Africa, opened her father's hospital in Gabon for the children's rehabilitation project.<sup>102</sup> In a related effort, Susan Garth, a British resident, took up a global campaign for the support of the children's evacuation and rehabilitation in Gabon, Ivory Coast and Sao Tome through a project known as "The Biafran Babies Appeal".<sup>103</sup> Garth had sent a casket to Buckingham Palace containing some of the remains of a Biafran girl who was allegedly decapitated in a rocket raid by

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<sup>100</sup> Other JCA Members, Catholic and Catholic Relief Services: Caritas Biafra, General Report, December 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-6.

<sup>101</sup> *Caritas Internationalis* Defines Policy on Child Relief in Biafra: R. M. Bennett's letter to the Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau regarding the evacuation of Biafran children, November 4, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-1-14.

<sup>102</sup> Kathleen Teltsch, "Gabon Hospital Opens for Biafran Children," *New York Times*, November 1, 1968, 4. Albert Schweitzer was a German physician and theologian in Gabon. He received the 1952 Nobel Peace Prize for his philosophy of "Reverence for Life."

<sup>103</sup> "The War: Nigerians Take Okigwi," *West Africa*, October 5, 1968, 1185.

the Nigerian Air Force.<sup>104</sup> Accompanying the casket was a letter of protest to Queen Elizabeth II, condemning the British arms policy on the war.<sup>105</sup> The royal officials gladly received Garth's delivery on behalf of the Queen who was on vacation in Scotland, thinking it was a bouquet of flowers. Garth, who believed the Queen had powers to stop the war, commanded her to intervene in the name of God.<sup>106</sup> She was also able to meet some Christian religious leaders such as the Pope to support the JCA's children's rehabilitation project.<sup>107</sup> As of January 1969, *Caritas Internationalis* had 750 Biafran children to care for in Gabon.<sup>108</sup> By July 1969, the number of Biafran children under Caritas' care in Gabon had risen to 2,183.<sup>109</sup> In Ivory Coast, the number of Biafran children under the rehabilitation program was 859.<sup>110</sup> Byrne noted that over five thousand children were treated in the rehabilitation centers.<sup>111</sup>

Other humanitarian organizations such as the Order of Malta and *Terres de Hommes* joined the JCA in the rehabilitation program in Gabon and Ivory Coast. The children's homes were located within the same area and jointly managed by the relief

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<sup>104</sup> "Briton Delivers Protest Letter to Queen Describing the Plight of Starving Children in Biafra," *New York Times*, September 23, 1968, 6.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> "The War: Nigerians Take Okigwi," *West Africa*, October 5, 1968, 1185.

<sup>108</sup> French Relief Aid to Biafra, January 23, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>109</sup> Biafra-French Military Attache's Comments on Military Situation and Relief Progress in Libreville, September 6, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Airgram.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Byrne, *Airlift to Biafra*, 107. See also Thomas J. Hamilton, "5000 Children Evacuated from Biafra in Civil War Will be Repatriated from Gabon and Ivory Coast," *New York Times*, October 11, 1970, 29.

agencies.<sup>112</sup> The French government channeled its support for the rehabilitation project through the Order of Malta. France set up a field hospital in Libreville, Gabon and reached an agreement with the Order of Malta to provide care for the children after medical treatment in the hospital.<sup>113</sup> Some private individuals such as Princess Irene and Princess Dona Cecilia of Netherlands also volunteered to help the JCA look after the children in Gabon.<sup>114</sup> The initial connection of Princess Cecilia de Bourbon Parma to the Biafran War occurred as a consequence of the detention of eighteen workers of the Italian oil company *Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi* who were captured by Biafran soldiers.<sup>115</sup> The Biafran government subsequently imprisoned the Italian oil workers and refused appeals for their release. Since the Biafran government had the sympathy of France, and Princess Cecilia had lived in Paris, the church groups considered her suitable to go to Biafra and negotiate for the release of the oil workers with Ojukwu.<sup>116</sup> This incident demonstrates how JCA relief efforts were sometimes shaped by domestic and international events outside the immediate control of JCA officials. Humanitarian workers in Biafra realized that the arrest and imprisonment of the Italian workers would limit their ability to raise funds internationally for their relief efforts. They were therefore interested in securing the releases of the workers and worked with government officials both within and outside Biafra to ensure that this was achieved.

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<sup>112</sup> Nigeria-Biafra: Report for 1968-1969 by Elsie Taylor, 1, File PCCA, 1973-5005-1-5.

<sup>113</sup> French Relief Aid to Biafra, January 23, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>114</sup> "The War: Nigerians Take Okigwi," *West Africa*, October 5, 1968, 1185.

<sup>115</sup> Finish Public Opinion on Nigerian Civil War, August 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>116</sup> Byrne, *Airlift to Biafra*, 131-132.

As the campaign for the evacuation and rehabilitation of Biafran babies attracted more international attention, some individuals and governments in Europe and North America offered to adopt Biafran children. Families in Canada showed interest in adopting some of these children, but Caritas considered it essential to respect the wishes of families not to have their children taken beyond Africa and decided not to participate in any evacuation beyond the neighboring countries.<sup>117</sup> It has to be kept in mind that the Biafran government had reluctantly consented to sending children needing critical medical treatment to neighboring countries for rehabilitation.<sup>118</sup> The government was either concerned about the security of the children or the political implications in the event that these children were not returned to their families. However, the sick children sent to neighboring countries for medical treatment were returned to their families as soon as they were rehabilitated.<sup>119</sup> The last batch of the evacuees was flown back to Lagos from Ivory Coast in November 1970 before heading back to East Central State.<sup>120</sup>

The plight of sick children in Biafra drew the attention of political leaders in other countries. For example, the Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau, offered to assist in

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<sup>117</sup> *Caritas Internationalis* Defines Policy on Child Relief in Biafra: R. M. Bennett's letter to the Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau regarding the evacuation of Biafran children, November 4, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-1-14.

<sup>118</sup> Press Information Service: Nigeria-Biafra, *Caritas Internationalis* Defines Policy on Child Relief in Biafra, October 31, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-1-14.

<sup>119</sup> *Caritas Internationalis* Defines Policy on Child Relief in Biafra: R. M. Bennett's letter to the Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau regarding the evacuation of Biafran children, November 4, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-1-14.

<sup>120</sup> William Borders, "Refugee Children Return to Lagos; First of 5,000 Ex-Biafrans Welcomed by Gowon," *New York Times*, November 10, 1970, 11.



the evacuation of the Biafran children for possible adoption in Canada.<sup>121</sup> Some critics dismissed Trudeau's proposal as unrealistic, considering that many Canadian babies in the late 1960s needed to be adopted and provided homes.<sup>122</sup> Given the humanitarian needs in Biafra at this time, a more feasible approach to combating the kwashiorkor scourge among Biafran children would have been to send food, clothes, medicine and other necessary supplies with some medical personnel that could support the JCA's effort.

Evacuating vulnerable children presented a huge moral challenge to the humanitarian workers. Reverend Byrne, who was directly involved in the evacuation and rehabilitation project described the selection of children for evacuation and rehabilitation as the most heartbreaking part of the humanitarian action for the church workers.<sup>123</sup> Although many children needed urgent attention, priority was given to those were likely to survive the flights. The selection process, according to Byrne, was akin to determining who should live and who should not. Each of the selected children was given an identification tag on the wrist with his or her name and village of origin written on it. JCA kept detailed information of all the children that were evacuated and helped the rehabilitation workers identify the parents or relatives of the children after their recovery. While the JCA was instrumental in the success of the children's evacuation and rehabilitation initiative, this success was possible only with the support and encouragement of the presidents of Gabon, Ivory Coast and Sao Tome. Political leaders

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<sup>121</sup> *Caritas Internationalis* Defines Policy on Child Relief in Biafra: R. M. Bennett's letter to the Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau regarding the evacuation of Biafran children, November 4, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-1-14.

<sup>122</sup> "Biafran Baby Airlift," *Telegram*, October 30, 1968.

<sup>123</sup> Byrne, *Airlift to Biafra*, 107.

in these countries wanted the world to recognize their contributions to the success of the humanitarian airlifts. The Gabonese President, Omar Bongo Ondimba, publicly asserted his role in running the children's airlift even with little support from the JCA.<sup>124</sup> This statement might have been driven by political imperatives given that Gabon had close ties with Biafra and that Gabon was one of the four African countries that recognized Biafra as an independent state.

For the approximately two years within which JCA's medical relief lasted, medical services were restricted to emergency care under the philosophy of "minimal care for the masses."<sup>125</sup> Minimal care meant providing limited medical care regardless of the severity of the medical condition. This meant that there was no elective or comprehensive medical care. The establishment of a comprehensive, nationwide program of modern diagnostic and treatment techniques was not possible due to the extreme difficulty in providing logistics to support such a program.<sup>126</sup> The seven hospitals that had not been destroyed by Nigerian military action were overcrowded with seventy persons occupying a space meant for twenty.<sup>127</sup> Some missionary doctors had to work for two years without a single day off. Commenting on the tragedy, Wallace Shellenberger explained, "I just tried to deal with the diseases that kill people most quickly – malaria, pneumonia and

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<sup>124</sup> "The War Nigerians Take Okigwi," *West Africa*, October 5, 1968, 1185.

<sup>125</sup> Medical Activities Report for August 1969 by E. T. O'Dell, Medical Secretary, September 5, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-6-7.

<sup>126</sup> World Council of Churches Refugee Relief Report, December 1, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-5-10.

<sup>127</sup> "Foreign Doctors in Biafra Despair Over Shortages," *New York Times*, October 7, 1968, 12.

dysentery.”<sup>128</sup> Shellenberger also noted that doctors did not bother trying to determine other health problems because in their view ninety per cent of the patients in the clinic had protein malnutrition which they could not help because of lack of protein food.<sup>129</sup> It was also not possible to engage in long term medical planning because of the rapidly changing war situation and the uncertainty of the airlift upon which all supplies depended. The “massification of medicine” was therefore considered the most workable option under the war situation. This approach to medical relief sometimes posed challenges for relief workers as some medical personnel could not easily adapt to the concept of mass medicine.<sup>130</sup>

Despite good professional training, some medical professionals, particularly the foreign doctors, found it difficult to accept lower standards of medical treatment imposed by the war.<sup>131</sup> For them, the shortage of food and medical supplies was very frustrating. Most medical installations had been displaced due to the military operations of the Nigerian army and were housed in inadequate quarters. Sick bays primarily meant for the treatment of children with nutritional deficiencies were established in a haphazard manner with no central direction, no control over personnel staffing and no supervision of the

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> By “massification of medicine,” I mean an attempt to provide medical services for the masses with health problems without regard to diagnostic details of individual cases. This kind of mass medicine was essentially meant to save the individual from dying as opposed to giving a permanent cure.

<sup>131</sup> Medical Activities Report for August 1969 by E. T. O’Dell, Medical Secretary, September 5, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-6-7.

utilization of the limited supplies.<sup>132</sup> A typical drug listing found in the provincial stores included only the most basic medical supplies.<sup>133</sup> This suggests that the humanitarian agencies only provided rudimentary medical service to the war victims. The aim, however, was to provide minimal care that could sustain life and reduce preventable deaths.

Forced to improvise, medical personnel did. Fabian Udechukwu, a head surgeon at Emekuku Teaching Hospital, for example, narrated how the pharmacy department of the hospital was able to produce dextrose, extract painkillers and tranquilizers from mixed pills for the treatment of tetanus infections and artillery cases injuries.<sup>134</sup> Sometimes, doctors used local herbal painkillers in surgical operations when there was no general anesthetic available.<sup>135</sup> When surgical bandages were not available, nurses dressed wounds with towels and bed-sheets. According to Udechukwu, the pharmacy was planning to produce its own antibiotics but was hindered by lack of equipment. The low immunity of the patients resulting from a lack of proper nutrition was also a challenge. The hospital tackled the protein deficiency problem by developing their own techniques of boiling cassava leaves for fifteen minutes to get some protein.<sup>136</sup> Given that cassava leaf was not a traditional local food in Biafra, the JCA in collaboration with the Biafran government embarked on a public awareness campaign to educate the local people on the

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> World Council of Churches, Drug Listing in Provincial Stores, September 5, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-5-10.

<sup>134</sup> “Letter from Biafra,” *The New Yorker*, October 4, 1969.

<sup>135</sup> “Foreign Doctors in Biafra Despair Over Shortages,” *New York Times*, October 7, 1968, 12.

<sup>136</sup> “Letter from Biafra,” *The New Yorker*, October 4, 1969.

use of the protein-rich cassava leaves to improve the quality of their diet.<sup>137</sup> The discovery of the cassava leaf as a rich source of protein led to massive cultivation of every available piece of land under the control of the Biafran government.<sup>138</sup> The JCA also engaged the services of experts in nutrition in their search for other protein sources using local products such as the palm oil kernel.<sup>139</sup> The uncommon commitment of the humanitarian agencies to saving life and alleviating human suffering drove them to different kinds of improvisation and ingenuity.

Apart from insufficient quantities of medical supplies, the hospital infrastructure was grossly inadequate. Most of the hospital buildings were formerly used as schools, community halls, churches or rural health centers.<sup>140</sup> Very few had electricity or running water. Cooking facilities were often sheds with open fire. Although basic drug supplies were adequate, critical supplies such as intravenous fluids were in short supply. All hospitals had at least one microscope, but simple laboratory reagents were in short supply. This meant that tests could only be carried out when needed reagents were available. The hospitals did have well qualified medical practitioners with high morale. However, the available number of nurses was not enough to meet the large number of

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<sup>137</sup> World Council of Churches Relief Report, December 1, 1969, 2, File PCCA, 1973-5005-5-10.

<sup>138</sup> Nordchurchaid: A Report of its operation by the Coordinating Manager, Ingvar Berg, June 10, 1970, 18, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-4.

<sup>139</sup> Memorandum from Nancy L. Nicole to James MacCracken, November 6, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-6-7.

<sup>140</sup> Michael Otusi Nkama, Oral Interview, July 30, 2011. Before the war broke out, almost every community had a town hall built solely through community effort. Amangwu Edda Autonomus Community alone had four halls and they all served as refugee camps and clinics during the war.

people in need of medical attention. The hospitals held outpatient clinics with approximately 1,009,354 patients. Even with the outpatient program, many patients could not easily access the hospitals. Owing to the few number of hospitals available to the large population, the outpatients had to walk long distances to access the service.<sup>141</sup>

Table 1. WCC`s sick bays and refugee camp medical support returns, November 30, 1969<sup>142</sup>

| WCC PROVINCES | SICK BAYS      |             |              | CAMP MEDICAL SUPPORT |        |                |
|---------------|----------------|-------------|--------------|----------------------|--------|----------------|
|               | Centers /month | In-patients | Out-patients | Camps                | Nurses | Out-patients/m |
| Aba           | 3              | 500         | 18,000       | 185                  | 107    | 118,000        |
| Annang-Uyo    | 6              | 700         | 29,000       | 35                   | 28     | 53,000         |
| Awka          | 4              | 200         | 23,000       | 191                  | 69     | 113,000        |
| Ohafia        | 12             | 500         | 52,000       | 304                  | 73     | 161,000        |
| Oji River     | 7              | 400         | 19,000       | 93                   | 22     | 31,000         |
| Okigwe        | 13             | 500         | 13,000       | 107                  | 18     | 29,000         |
| Onitsha       | 12             | 1,000       | 7,000        | 117                  | 23     | 62,000         |
| Orlu          | 15             | 1,500       | 12,000       | 232                  | 27     | 49,000         |

<sup>141</sup> Other JCA Members, Catholic and Catholic Relief Services: Caritas Biafra, General Report, December 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-6.

<sup>142</sup> World Council of Churches Refugee Relief Report, December 1, 1969, Appendix B, File PCCA, 1973-5005-5-10.

|         |     |       |         |       |     |         |
|---------|-----|-------|---------|-------|-----|---------|
| Owerri  | 22  | 1,200 | 31,000  | 437   | 121 | 193,000 |
| Umuahia | 13  | 900   | 12,000  | 56    | 19  | 41,000  |
| TOTALS  | 107 | 7,400 | 216,000 | 1,757 | 507 | 850,000 |

A brief analysis of the medical support in the ten provinces in Biafra suggests that the camps lacked adequate nursing staff. For instance, the data on Ohafia Province, which had 304 refugee camps, 73 nurses and 161,000 outpatients, shows that one nurse had to look after 4 camps and an average of 2205 outpatients in a month. In Orlu Province, with 232 refugee camps and 49,000 outpatients, there were only 27 nurses available. There was one nurse for 9 camps and an average of 1814 outpatients per month. This picture is representative of almost all the provinces. It therefore explains why the health care provided by the humanitarian agencies was minimal.

The JCA's effort to provide medical service in Biafra was greatly hampered by the unhygienic environment, as the crowded condition of the refugee camps facilitated the spread of infectious diseases.<sup>143</sup> Most of the internally displaced persons who could not be accommodated in other people's private homes were accommodated in refugee camps where 500 to 1000 persons shared a classroom. The very poor sanitary conditions of the refugee camps sometimes led to infections and epidemics. Epidemic incidents were quite high, and children were usually the most vulnerable due to their low immunity and poor

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<sup>143</sup> Nwokolo, *Biafran Refugees*, 31.

resistance to diseases.<sup>144</sup> JCA officials devoted much time and resources to put in place measures aimed at ensuring hygiene. Part of the effort to combat the incidence of diseases such as dysentery and diarrhea was to ensure that the refugee camps had many pit latrines that could serve large populations. Each latrine was to serve a maximum of 30 people.<sup>145</sup> The refugees were advised to cover the latrines after use and to wash their hands. The JCA ensured adequate availability of disinfectants to maintain a disease-free environment.<sup>146</sup> Members of the Biafran National Red Cross assisted with regular inspection of the latrines as directed by the camp medical authorities. With these measures in place, the spread of diseases in the camps was minimal.

### **OTHER SERVICES PROVIDED BY THE JCA**

JCA's humanitarian intervention in Biafra was not limited to medical and food aid. The organization also provided clothes for children, blankets for refugees, bath towels, pyjamas for wounded soldiers and other war victims, and bales of fabric for making clothes for the refugees, orphans and widows of the war.<sup>147</sup> Although clothing was not at the top of the organization's priority list, it was considered necessary, especially for the health of the children. A large number of the Biafran children left their homes ill-clad. Many had no clothes to change into or to wear during cold harmattan and

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 32

<sup>146</sup> Document Handed Over to Mr G. Murray on Thursday, March 28, 1968 at the Meeting of Christian Council of Biafra held in Owerri, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid.



rainy seasons. As the war dragged on, most of the internally displaced children wore rags while many practically lived without any clothes.<sup>148</sup> Undernourishment and exposure to cold conditions had grave implications for children's health. The church groups understood this and brought in clothes for children and displaced persons. However, the tropical climate proved helpful in shielding the children from changes in weather conditions.

JCA officials also considered shelter an important part of their care program. They ensured that buildings (commonly schools and town halls) used as refugee camps were in good condition. They provided funds for each of the provinces for reconstruction projects.<sup>149</sup> Such funds were used to purchase local building materials such as mats, bamboos and doors. The building projects were a self-help project in which the refugees provided the labor while the JCA members provided the fund for materials.<sup>150</sup> The building project focused mainly on improving the existing buildings such hospitals and sickbays. Some building materials, such as roofing sheets, were imported while most other materials were locally produced. The quantity of materials imported for construction was still kept to a minimum to create room for the more desperately needed food and drugs. The JCA also provided grants to help improve water supplies to hospitals and other essential projects.<sup>151</sup> Much of the funds that supported the humanitarian aid

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<sup>148</sup> Nwokolo, *Biafran Refugees*, 23.

<sup>149</sup> World Council of Churches Refugee Relief Report from the WCC Headquarters, Ubulu-Ihejiofor, December 1, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-5-10.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*

came from the German and Scandinavian churches.<sup>152</sup> In spite of the challenges it faced in its operations, JCA's measures to alleviate suffering and save lives proved successful in certain areas. The provision of food and medical supplies helped save many lives as the medical and nutritional condition of the civilians improved through such efforts.<sup>153</sup> A total of 120 tons of protein flown in per night by the humanitarian organizations provided the minimum protein required to stave off kwashiorkor and edema.<sup>154</sup>

A critical examination of the JCA's intervention in the starvation epidemic in Biafra, however, shows that the JCA neglected a very important step that would have improved its overall efficiency. Throughout 1968, epidemiological surveillance was not considered an essential component of the intervention program.<sup>155</sup> The famine in Biafra was characterized by a triad – starvation deaths, epidemics and social disruption. This triad was met with another triad which included food distribution, administration of drugs and work programs (housing and clothing). Efforts to provide food for the war victims in critical conditions met some difficulties because of the inability of the humanitarian agencies to reach the target groups.<sup>156</sup> Sometimes, food went only to those who were

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<sup>152</sup> Christian Council in Biafra, 1968-1969, Dr Clyne Shepherd's Reply to Secretary for Overseas Mission, Presbyterian Church, Canada, September 10, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8.

<sup>153</sup> Progress Report from Reverend G. E. Igwe (Organising Secretary, World Council of Churches Refugee relief) and His Assistant, K. Reijnierse, to Pastor V. Mollerup, General Secretary Nordchurchaid, January 27, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Report of the US Public Health Service Doctors on the Emergency Feeding Program in Nigeria by William H. Foege, May 15, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-6-7. This report was sent to members of Church World Service and those involved in humanitarian service in Biafra.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

strong enough to come out and stand in the lines. Those who were too weak to leave their homes or emerge from the bush where they were hiding were often unable to access food relief and sometimes died of starvation. Such omissions were the result of poor assessment of the catastrophe and the lack of a system of basic data collection.

Medical experts assessed and described the Biafran famine as an epidemic of starvation that required epidemiological analysis.<sup>157</sup> Describing the problem as an epidemic means that it was a public health issue that called for general surveillance. It was necessary to know the number of deaths that occurred, where they occurred, who were affected, the age groups that were affected, the location of people, the density and direction of movement of the internally displaced people. It would have been necessary, for example, to keep a record of people affected by different kind of diseases and the geographical distribution, but this system of record keeping did not exist. J. Lyle Conrad, an epidemiologist with the United States National Communicable Diseases Centre, observed that until the first public health service officer arrived in Nigeria, none of the humanitarian agencies thought it necessary to establish a simple reporting procedure for infectious diseases, deaths due to various causes, malnutrition cases, and other diseases in the hospitals and feeding centers.<sup>158</sup> Cato Aall, who served as Deputy Field Coordinator and Medical Advisor to the Joint Nigerian Red Cross/International Committee of the Red Cross, noted this absence of nutritional surveillance and agreed with Conrad that such

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Report of the Participation of National Communicable Disease Center, Atlanta in Nigeria by J. Lyle Conrad and William J. Foege, March 27, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-6-7.

records were critical for resource allocation to the war victims.<sup>159</sup> For instance, nutritional surveillance would have helped to provide reliable estimates of medical facilities needed in designated areas for malnutrition cases, estimates of food required to supplement the malnourished in a given area and areas where relief assistance should have been stopped due to their health stability.

The absence of a reporting system meant ceaseless debates over the number of deaths that occurred as a result of the Biafran famine. As of July 1968, Middlekoop could not give any definite figure on the death toll. In an interview with the *New York Times* at the height of the war in 1968, he lamented: “This week, I just can’t give a figure. It’s accelerating every hour. It is a desperate situation. That’s all I can say.”<sup>160</sup> The lack of a systematic record keeping system also explains why different people gave conflicting figures on deaths arising from the famine crisis. For example, as of April 1969, Goddell put the death statistics at 1 million whereas the ICRC’s acting president, Jacques Freymond put the figure in June 1969 at 1.5 million.<sup>161</sup> In November 1968, the Acting Secretary General of *Caritas Internationalis*, R. M. Bennett claimed 2 million had died.<sup>162</sup> The discrepancies in these figures suggests that they were based solely on estimates.

Although obtaining an accurate figure of deaths was probably impossible, a consistent

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<sup>159</sup> Cato Aall, “Relief, Nutrition and Health Problems in the Nigeria-Biafra War,” *The Journal of Tropical Pediatrics*, 16, no. 2, June 1970, 84. See also Report of the Participation of National Communicable Disease Center, Atlanta in Nigeria by J. Lyle Conrad, March 27, 1969.

<sup>160</sup> “Famine Conditions Worsen in Biafra,” *New York Times*, July 29, 1968.

<sup>161</sup> “Hunger Death Toll in Biafra Reaches 1.5 million,” *New York Times*, June 20, 1969.

<sup>162</sup> *Caritas Internationalis* Defines Policy on Child Relief in Biafra: R. M. Bennett’s letter to the Canadian Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau regarding the evacuation of Biafran children, November 4, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-1-14.

system of recordkeeping would have helped to provide a more reliable figure, which could have also made the relief effort more efficient and systematic.

In analyzing the JCA's intervention from this perspective, it is important to note that the agency came into existence only after the starvation crisis in Biafra had begun. Biafra was the first experience of such global and trans-Atlantic humanitarian intervention by church groups. Owing to the lack of experience in such large scale humanitarian action, the organization did not have the capacity or the skilled personal to undertake comprehensive epidemic surveillance and record keeping. Documentation was clearly secondary to the humanitarian church groups that were more concerned about saving lives than keeping a record of the dead. Not even the more experienced International Committee of the Red Cross could keep a comprehensive record of its activities until a team of experts from the United States National Communicable Disease Center joined the ICRC's humanitarian efforts in Biafra in January 1969.<sup>163</sup> The inexperience of the JCA largely explains why there is no comprehensive data on the number of deaths, the age distribution and the pattern of spread of diseases. The JCA's relief in Biafra was carried out as the war continued, compromising the administrative and logistical support necessary for effective data collection and documentation. An assessment of the magnitude of the operation, the cooperation of the various church groups and the volume of supplies shows that the JCA's humanitarian operation was a classic example of a complex emergency in which the Biafran society subsisted mainly

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<sup>163</sup> Report of the US Public Health Service Doctors on the Emergency Feeding Program in Nigeria by William H. Foegen, May 15, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-6-7.

on trans-Atlantic humanitarian support.<sup>164</sup> The unique attributes of JCA's multinational and multi-organizational intervention in Biafra led one scholar to describe it as an unprecedented experience in the history of relief operation.<sup>165</sup> *Caritas Internationalis* described the relief operation as the “largest ever civilian airlift in history and a turning point in the history of humanitarian intervention and in the way relief agencies operate.”<sup>166</sup>

Within the first few days of January 1970, however, representatives of the churches at Uli predicted that Biafra would soon collapse. On the night of January 10, 1970, the Chief of Flight Operations and one of the chief pilots flew to Uli to make preparations for the evacuation of relief workers in Biafra. The JCA crews evacuated most of the personnel of the Protestant and Catholic Churches along with some personnel of the ICRC and *Terre des Hommes* that were still in Biafra. Three days after the collapse of the Republic of Biafra on January 15, 1970, Bishop Joseph Whelan (one of the Biafran Bishops) and fifty seven other missionaries who had not joined the last relief plane were arrested by the Nigerian government, tried, sentenced and later expelled from Nigeria.<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>164</sup> Complex emergencies are protracted political crises that have the ability to destroy the political, economic, cultural and civil integrity of established societies. For more information, see John Hannigan, *Disaster Without Borders: The International Politics of Natural Disasters* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 56. See also Adrian Hastings, *A History of African Christianity, 1950-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>165</sup> Morris Davis, “Audits of International Relief in the Nigerian Civil War: Some Political Perspectives,” *International Organization*, 29, no 2, 1975, 505.

<sup>166</sup> “Aid to Biafran Victims,” accessed June 4, 2014, <http://www.caritas.org/who-we-are/history/>

<sup>167</sup> Ron McGraw, Oral Interview, February 21, 2012. See also John de St Jorre, *The Brothers' War: Biafra and Nigeria* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972), 403.

They were charged with breaking Nigerian immigration law by entering Nigeria and taking employment without the written approval of the Chief Federal Immigration Officer.<sup>168</sup> The Irish and American missionaries, including nine nuns who were tried in Port Harcourt, were sentenced to four months imprisonment with an option of fine while those who were tried in Lagos were sentenced to six months imprisonment with an option of fine.<sup>169</sup> Each of the missionaries in Port Harcourt paid a £100 fine but were still placed in detention.<sup>170</sup> Some of the missionaries felt unjustly treated because they were not allowed any legal or diplomatic representation.<sup>171</sup> The final decision to deport the missionaries came after the visit of Alhaji Kam Seim, the Federal Commissioner for Internal Affairs to the Eastern Region, and following strong diplomatic pressure from the British, Irish and American missions in Lagos.<sup>172</sup> It took the visit of Alhaji Seim, a Muslim, to the missionaries in detention to facilitate their release in a conflict that had been portrayed to the outside world as religious war. A Nigerian government statement, however, described the decision to deport the missionaries as “an act of clemency” and a further demonstration of the federal government’s policy of “magnanimity towards the former secessionist regime and those involved in its activities.”<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> Byrne, *Airlift to Biafra*, 171.

<sup>169</sup> “Nigeria ‘Cat and Mouse’ with Missionaries,” *Catholic Herald*, February 20, 1970, 1. See also “Nigeria Deporting Missionaries,” *Catholic Herald*, February 6, 1970, 1.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>171</sup> “Nigeria Deporting Missionaries,” *Catholic Herald*, February 6, 1970, 1.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

As of January 11, 1970, the JCA still had 1,500 tons of food supplies waiting to be delivered to Uli.<sup>174</sup> When it was clear that the collapse of Biafra was imminent, the JCA officials made the decision to hand over its stores of medicine and food at Sao Tome to the Nigerian government. They also offered some aircraft to help deliver the goods to any place in Nigeria from where they could be transported to Biafra. Some members of the church groups were also sent to discuss this arrangement with the Nigerian government.<sup>175</sup> The Nigerian government rejected the offer, stating that it did not want to deal with any persons who had taken part in humanitarian work in Biafra or to use any aircraft or supplies that belonged to them.<sup>176</sup> Countries such as France, Portugal, South Africa and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) were not allowed to give any relief aid because the Nigerian government saw them as having been “studiously hostile” to Nigeria.<sup>177</sup> Humanitarian agencies such as Caritas and WCC were refused opportunities to assist in relief work. “Let them keep their bloody money” Gowon stated, “Nigeria will do this itself.”<sup>178</sup> The attitude of the Nigerian government was in line with the general opinion among many Nigerians that the humanitarian aid given by some countries and

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<sup>174</sup> “World Relief Organizations Urge Food Rush into Biafra,” *New York Times*, January 11, 1970.

<sup>175</sup> Nordchurchaid: A Report of its operation by the Coordinating Manager, Ingvar Berg, June 10, 1970, 17, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-4.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>177</sup> Lawrence Fellows, “Four Countries Barred by Lagos from Giving Help; France, Portugal, Rhodesia and South Africa,” *New York Times*, January 15, 1970, 1.

<sup>178</sup> John de St Jorre, *The Brothers' War: Biafra and Nigeria* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1972), 403.



humanitarian agencies provided support for the “Biafran rebellion” thereby prolonging the war.<sup>179</sup>

Following the decision of the Nigerian government, the JCA decided on January 22, 1970 to terminate its operation. The remaining supplies in Sao Tome were made available to other relief actions in other countries, and the JCA staff members in Sao Tome were disbanded.<sup>180</sup> Knowing that starvation was still acute in Biafra, the JCA stationed some aircraft and crew members in Sao Tome until 26 January, 1970. They had hoped to send in relief supplies if the Nigerian government changed its position and gave the permission. When the Nigerian government refused to budge, the JCA members closed their stores and ordered their aircraft to leave the island of Sao Tome. Only the Chief of Flight Operations and a few assistants remained a few more weeks to conclude necessary obligations with the Sao Tome government.

## CONCLUSION

The famine crisis in Biafra was a complex emergency situation that presented a critical challenge to individuals and humanitarian groups involved. The church groups’ response under the auspices of the JCA to the crisis was reminiscent of the 19<sup>th</sup> century rush for missionary work in Africa. Many church groups volunteered to provide relief support to alleviate the suffering of the civilian masses in Biafra. The key argument of this chapter is that the formation of the JCA and its role in Biafra was unique in many

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<sup>179</sup> Nigeria Summary, July 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>180</sup> Nordchurchaid: A Report of its operation by the Coordinating Manager, Ingvar Berg, June 10, 1970, 17, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-4.

respects. It was historic in that the Catholic and Protestant Churches cooperated in the largest civilian humanitarian intervention in history in spite of their theological differences. Also significant was the motivations of the various church groups that came together to form the JCA. These church groups were united and driven by what they called a “divine law” to care for one’s neighbor and the mandate to save innocent lives.<sup>181</sup> It was only on the basis of this divine principle that the church groups defiantly neglected diplomatic niceties and sovereignty to send relief to the starving civilians in Biafra. Such a humanitarian intervention by a consortium of church groups was the first of its kind in the modern history of church humanitarian intervention.

The joint effort and spirit of harmonious co-operation exhibited by the church groups suggest that they were driven more by altruistic humanitarian motives than by political expediencies or a proselytizing agenda. The relief flights to Biafra were risky, expensive and were carried out despite the harsh criticisms and opposition of many Nigerians and especially the Nigerian government. It was the risk associated with the humanitarian effort that earned relief flights descriptive phrases such as “mercy flights,” “mercy angels,” “Holy Ghost Airlines” and “Jesus Christ Airline.”<sup>182</sup> Nonetheless, the humanitarian crisis in Biafra also offered the church groups an opportunity to reassert their influence in a century when the church was no longer active in the global community.

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<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

<sup>182</sup> See Hugh McCullum, “Remembering the Nightmare of Biafra,” *Presbyterian Record*, 2004. See also Michael Draper, “Features-Editor's Choice-Jesus Christ Airlines-The Movie-Michael Draper heralds a new TV documentary about Joint Church Aid's relief airlift into Biafra in 1968-70,” *Aeroplane Monthly* 30, no. 346 (2002): 36-39.

The model of the JCA's response had a profound effect on other humanitarian initiatives such as that of the Jewish community in the US, which consequently resulted in the establishment of the Jewish Emergency Effort for Biafran Relief in August 1968.<sup>183</sup> It has been described as “the first time the entire Jewish community volunteered to join with the Catholics and Protestants in an international humanitarian effort, to serve people who were not Jewish and would not likely ever become Jews.”<sup>184</sup> The Jewish community had the option of channeling its relief aid through the Jewish community in Israel, but preferred the interreligious option of working with the JCA. This was an uncommon understanding created by the severity of the humanitarian crisis in Biafra. This is one of the key findings of this study.

To say that the JCA was driven by a singular humanitarian impulse is not to suggest that there were no political or religious considerations in the day to day activities of JCA officials and church relief workers. Rather, the argument here is that given the uncertain circumstances under which the JCA was formed, the unlikely coalition of church groups that came together to form organization and the hostile war-time conditions under which it operated in Biafra, the JCA was still able to sustain its humanitarian objective. Its success in Biafra was the result of a rare united moral

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<sup>183</sup> Catholic Relief Services, *Nigeria-Biafra Relief, Summer Edition 1968*, NAE, MPS/X6. The formation of the American Jewish Emergency Effort for Biafran Relief was made up of 21 national Jewish organizations ranging from religious, communal, social welfare to philanthropic groups. The coming together of these Jewish groups that had until then acted as single groups was on its own historic.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

commitment to a humanitarian case in ways that transcended traditional denominational differences and rivalries among church groups.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE RELIEF WAR: OBSTACLES AND DEBATES

Although the JCA achieved some measure of success where other humanitarian agencies failed, it grappled with a wide range of difficulties. The organization's relief effort in Biafra was fraught with enormous challenges ranging from poor financing, inadequate transportation facilities, lack of experienced personnel, to violent opposition from the Nigerian government. These challenges stood as obstacles to effective relief delivery to the suffering civilians in Biafra. The JCA also found it difficult to engage with both sides of the conflict in order to ensure that it could carry out its humanitarian work. Although JCA officials were keen to maintain the organization's neutrality in the conflict, the Nigerian government remained deeply skeptical and hostile to its activities throughout the war. On the Biafran side, the JCA had to resist Biafran attempts to commandeer the organization's operational resources to prosecute the war.

This chapter examines the challenges and debates surrounding the JCA's humanitarian effort. It also assesses the operational role of the JCA as a humanitarian organization. In its exploration of the debate about sovereignty as it related to JCA's activities, the chapter argues that the belligerents' claim to sovereignty over humanitarian aid contributed in prolonging the suffering of the masses. The struggle to assert national sovereignty on both sides of the conflict ultimately impeded the capacity of the JCA to carry out its humanitarian work. Consequently, large stockpiles of food never reached many of the starving civilians. An assessment of the JCA as a humanitarian agency also

shows that its relief effort had certain unintended consequences that reinforced opinions about its neutrality in the conflict. These included the perception, particularly on the Nigerian side, that by providing foreign exchange for the Biafran government, the JCA unnecessarily prolonged the war. This perception had a negative impact on the public reputation of church organizations in Nigeria during and after the war. Overall, this chapter argues that humanitarian aid in Biafra was controversial and deeply contested.

### **OBSTACLES TO EFFECTIVE RELIEF DELIVERY**

The JCA's airlift to Biafra succeeded in alleviating the severe famine, but only after overcoming severe logistical difficulties. The initial challenge that confronted the relief operation in Biafra was inadequate air transport facility. The JCA was essentially an emergency relief organization that was born as a result of the Biafran famine. As an ad hoc emergency relief organization, it had no funds of its own to acquire the aircraft that the emergency demanded. The organization solely depended on generous donations from individuals, organizations and governments to sustain its operation. Reverend Father Tony Byrne of Caritas who started the "mercy flights" to Biafra, began the airlift by hiring chartered planes for as much as \$3,800 per flight.<sup>1</sup> The low quantity of relief delivery due to lack of aircraft, led to the acquisition of more planes by other church groups. When even these additional planes could not meet the mounting pressure occasioned by the growing rate of starvation, the American government sold four C97

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<sup>1</sup> A Tribute to Mark the First Anniversary of the Airlift to Biafra by Raymond F. Kennedy, March 27, 1969, File Presbyterian Church of Canada Archives (hereafter PCCA), 1973-5005-7-8.

planes to the JCA in January 1969 at a scrap value of \$4,000 each.<sup>2</sup> The C97 planes helped to increase airlift capacity but they could not solve the problem entirely as only 100 to 200 tons of food reached Uli Airport per night, just a fraction of the 500 tons needed to provide minimum level of care in Biafra.<sup>3</sup> Until the relief effort accelerated around September 1968, humanitarian agencies estimated that between 5,000 and 10,000 persons, especially children were dying daily as a result of malnutrition.<sup>4</sup>

In 1969, the JCA launched a fund raising campaign through telegrams, letters, and posters calling for US support in the airlift. Some of the telegrams read: “US aircraft sit idle while Biafrans starve”; “Release 2 more C97’s with adequate spare parts requested by Jointchurchaid airlift, now”; “Biafra facing critical 90 days famine” and “Jointchurchaid airlift reduced for lack of operative aircraft.”<sup>5</sup> JCA wanted more aircraft because of the overuse of the few available ones. The average number of airlifts that the available aircraft could undertake per night was between 10 and 11 as against an expected average of 20 airlifts per night. For some reasons, the US government did not respond to the JCA’s call for more aircraft. The first eight planes sold to the relief agencies – four to

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<sup>2</sup> “Church Unit Cold to Biafra Relief: World Council Says Flights Only Prolong Civil War,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1969, 49. See also Attention: Emergency! Jointchurchaid Airlift Needs More Planes by U. N. Diggsby, April/May 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-5.

<sup>3</sup> “The Resurrection of Biafra,” *Newsweek*, March 24, 1969, 53.

<sup>4</sup> Nigeria Press Summary, October 24, 1968, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram. These figures were based on estimates. For other figures on the daily death rate, see “Church Unit Cold to Biafra Relief: World Council Says Flights Only Prolong Civil War,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1969, 49; Hugh McCullum, “Biafra: Obituary,” *The United Church Observer*, February 15, 1970, 12.

<sup>5</sup> Attention: Emergency! Jointchurchaid Airlift Needs More Planes, by U. N. Diggsby, April/May 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-5.

JCA and four to ICRC – by the American government in January 1969, attracted harsh criticisms from many Nigerians including some university professors who argued that the supply of those planes showed that the Western powers had no good intentions in Africa.<sup>6</sup> The supply of the aircraft was also interpreted by some Nigerians as a sign of a “long policy of secret aggression against Nigeria” and disregard for the Nigerian sovereignty in favor of the JCA.<sup>7</sup> Even though it is illogical to argue that the supply of aircraft for relief aid amounted to a policy of aggression, some Nigerians lived with that impression.

A US Embassy official also observed that the US attitude of by-passing the Nigerian government to provide relief support for the starving civilians in Biafra reinforced an existing suspicion among Nigerian officials that the US government was providing covert support for Biafra through the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).<sup>8</sup> The United States, from the beginning of the war, refused to be militarily involved.<sup>9</sup> The decision not to supply arms to either of the warring parties was based on its desire to avoid any risk of deepening the crisis. More importantly, the US “policy of neutrality” was in line with its tradition of avoiding major policy initiatives in former European

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<sup>6</sup> Nigerian Press Roundup, December 29 and 30 1968, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>7</sup> Memorandum of Conversation Held at a Luncheon at the Residence of Nigerian Ambassador to the US on October 12, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria.

<sup>8</sup> Former NNDP Minister’s View on US-Nigerian Policy and Unrest in Western Nigeria, January 28, 1968, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>9</sup> *Relief Problems in Nigeria-Biafra: Hearings Before the Sub-Committee to Investigate Problems Connected with Refugees and Escapees of the Committee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, Ninety-First Congress, Second Session, January 21-22, 1970* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1970), 169.



colonial countries.<sup>10</sup> As a result, its policies on the conflict were largely guided by British initiatives.<sup>11</sup>

Although the US government continued to recognize the Nigerian government, it also provided humanitarian aid to the war victims in Biafra. The US government channeled its relief aid through the ICRC and not the Nigerian government. The rumor that the CIA provided secret support for Biafra seemed to be part of Nigerian government propaganda to discourage the US support for humanitarian aid in Biafra. On January 28, 1969, the *New Nigerian* newspaper carried a headline entitled, “Hands off Nigerian Crisis, USA Warned.”<sup>12</sup> According to the paper, the Soviet Ambassador to Nigeria, A. I. Romanov, alleged in a two-day conference of Nigerian-Soviet Friendship Society in Kaduna in January 1969, that imperialist countries, particularly the US were responsible for prolonging the Nigeria-Biafra War.<sup>13</sup> Although the Ambassador denied making such a statement when he was confronted by the US Ambassador, the impression among many Nigerian government officials was that the United States continued to act as an enemy.<sup>14</sup> These criticisms may have influenced the decision of the US to exercise restraint in yielding to the pressure of the humanitarian agencies.

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<sup>10</sup> George A. Obiozor, *The United States and the Nigerian Civil War: An American Dilemma in Africa, 1966-1970* (Lagos: Nigerian Institute of International Affairs, 1993), 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Russian Ambassador Attack on US Policy at Kaduna Press Conference, January 28, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Soviet Ambassador Denies Accusing USG Responsible for Nigerian Problems, January 28, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

A related obstacle that snarled effective relief delivery in Biafra was the limited cargo-handling capacity of the Biafran Airport at Uli. The Biafran airport, which was actually a highway that had been widened and converted to an airstrip, had originally been designed by the government for small military and transport aircraft.<sup>15</sup> Although the airport was long enough for medium sized aircraft, it was too narrow and had no taxi-strips and parking places. Equipment such as lighting beacons and radio were inadequate. To improve the quality of the facilities at the airport so that relief planes could deliver their supplies, the JCA had to install standard air-traffic control and communication equipment with beacons and airport lighting. Unfortunately, the installation of the new equipment did not increase the carrying capacity of the airport, which was really an airstrip, because of the need for parking space. Owing to time constraints and the emergency nature of the operation, it was not possible to construct a parking space using the normal concrete and asphalt. The Catholic Relief Services had to import aluminum planking from Canada for this purpose.<sup>16</sup> After installing the planking, the airport's carrying capacity increased to the point of handling about thirty-five landings per night. In spite of these improvements, the air traffic control tower was so far from the airfield that it was difficult for air control officers to see what was happening on the strip. The JCA considered introducing better navigable aids such as radar and Omni Directional

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<sup>15</sup> Hugh G. Lloyd, Mona L Mollerup and Carl A. Bratved, *The Nordchurchaid Airlift to Biafra, 1968-1970: An Operation Report* (Copenhagen: Folkekirkens Nodhjaep, 1972), 23.

<sup>16</sup> Nordchurchaid: A Report of its operations by the Coordinating Manager, Ingvar Berg, June 10, 1970, 7 File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-4.

Radio Range (VOR), but thought that the Nigerian government would consider it an unfriendly act.<sup>17</sup>

The JCA also had difficulty finding experienced personnel who could coordinate the unloading of relief supplies. The organizing secretary of the World Council of Churches, M. J. Middlekoop asked the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) to help arrange twelve Peace Corps members from the United States who could help coordinate laborers engaged in the unloading work.<sup>18</sup> Efficiency in the unloading process was restricted because relief supplies had to be delivered at night. The large volume of the supplies and the pressure to unload quickly without being attacked by the Nigerian Air Force became a major challenge. The offloading operation was also hampered because the Biafran airport could not be well lit, otherwise it might attract the attention of the Nigerian Air Force.

The Nigerian government posed one of the most serious challenges to delivering aid to the Biafran refugees. According to Nigerian officials, the humanitarian relief supplies also provided cover for clandestine air delivery of arms to the "rebels."<sup>19</sup> In addition, the Nigerian government considered the unauthorized nightly airlifts by the JCA as violation of its airspace.<sup>20</sup> The Nigerian government complained to the Nordic Prime Ministers on February 28, 1969 that "Some voluntary relief agencies chose to operate

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>18</sup> M. J. Middelkoop's Letter to E. G. R. Hayward in UNICEF, New York, September 30, 1968. Middelkoop was the Organizing Secretary of World Council of Churches Relief in Biafra, File PCCA 1973-5005-7-8.

<sup>19</sup> William B Macomber Jr.'s reply to Honorable W. E. Brock, August 7, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafara-Nigeria.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

independently in total disregard of the FMG (Federal Military Government) authority over its own airspace and in a manner unknown to any international laws, conventions and practices.”<sup>21</sup> This statement was particularly referring to the JCA members who never received any permission from the Nigerian government to fly in relief supplies. The Nigerian government viewed the nightly airlift as a serious violation of Nigerian sovereignty, which justified its attacking of the relief planes. From mid-September 1968, Uli Airport was seriously threatened by the Nigerian troops, and had to be evacuated for three days until Biafran troops were able to push them back.

Until November 1968, the Nigerian Air Force lacked the capability to launch aerial attacks on Uli airport, which could easily have forced Biafra to surrender. In November 1968, the Nigerian Air Force announced that it had acquired the means to stop night flights to Biafra and within that month, Uli was bombed at night for the first time.<sup>22</sup> After then, Uli experienced heavy bomb attacks almost every night. The bombing was done by an aircraft of the Nigerian Air Force euphemistically called the “intruder.”<sup>23</sup> The aircraft, thought to be a DC4, circled Uli almost every night and threatened the relief pilots. The high-flying blockade-running planes usually skirted Mount Cameroon from where it monitored relief carrying planes.<sup>24</sup> A journalist who recounted the threats by the

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<sup>21</sup> Nordchurchaid: A Report of its operation by the Coordinating Manager, Ingvar Berg, June 10, 1970, 23, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> “An Eyewitness Reports Starvation in Biafra” by Winston S. Churchill, March 3, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 65/446.

<sup>24</sup> Lloyd Garrison, “Swede, Defying Blockade, Flies New Route to Biafra,” *New York Times*, December 14, 1968, 1.

Nigerian Air Force noted, “The second you land, you will be a ball of flames.”<sup>25</sup> As the relief plane landed, the “intruder” dropped its bombs. The “intruder’s” harassment discouraged some pilots from flying relief supplies to Biafra. The “intruder” plane was usually flown by Egyptians, South Africans and East German pilots who one Red Cross official described as “wild.”<sup>26</sup> About ten bombs were dropped in each night of the attack, but often without flares so very few hit the runway close to the aircraft. On some occasions, the Nigerian Air Force strafed the airport with rockets and machine gun fire in the day time. Some aircraft were destroyed or badly damaged as a result. Attacks by the Nigerian Air Force were not accurate mainly because the Soviet-supplied radar located at Port Harcourt, though capable of detecting night flights, could not plot the correct altitude and speed of the relief planes for interception.<sup>27</sup>

In spite of these limitations, the Nigerian Air Force was still able to disrupt the effort of the relief agencies. Tons of food and medicine meant to be delivered to Biafra were stacked up in Sao Tome.<sup>28</sup> The efficiency of relief delivery thus, depended on the counter activities of the Nigerian “intruder.” When Nigerian air attacks resulted in

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<sup>25</sup> “An Eyewitness Reports Starvation in Biafra,” by Winston S. Churchill, March 3, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 65/446.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. See also Hugh McCullum, Nigeria/Biafra: A Special 8 Page Report, *Canadian Churchman*, February 13, 1970.

<sup>27</sup> Conversation of the Nigerian War between Soviet Ambassador and British Commissioner, September 24, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria, Airgram.

<sup>28</sup> Lloyd Garrison, Swede, Defying Blockade, Flies New Route to Biafra,” *New York Times*, August 14, 1968, 1.

casualties or damage to relief aircraft, operations were temporarily reduced.<sup>29</sup> Relief pilots and other personnel were also reluctant to fly when attacks were heavy. On some occasions, the relief agencies had to suspend their airlifts as a result of ground fire from the Nigerian military.<sup>30</sup> This was the experience in early November 1968 when several men were killed and injured and an aircraft damaged following an explosion at Uli. Although this explosion was not directly attributed to the Nigerian Air Force, one of the companies that managed some relief planes suspended its flights and expressed the wish to withdraw from the operation. The JCA officials had to persuade the company's crew members to return to work.

In February 1969, JCA experienced another crisis when four of its aircraft were damaged by bomb splinters in one night. Some of the crew members left the operation resulting in a reduction in relief supplies. Respite came for crew involved with relief flights when the "intruder" had technical problems or weather conditions were bad, especially during the rainy season. At these times, Nigerian air attacks were significantly reduced. When in June 1969, the Nordchurchaid's aircraft was hit and the ICRC plane was shot down, ICRC suspended its relief operation. This greatly affected relief supplies to Biafra. The JCA officials made the decision to continue operations but this could only be done when crew members were willing to fly. Crew members were ordered not to fly unless in complete darkness when it would be difficult for the Nigerian "intruder" to

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<sup>29</sup> Nordchurchaid: A Report of its operation by the Coordinating Manager, Ingvar Berg, June 10, 1970, 20, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-4.

<sup>30</sup> Lloyd Garrison, "Swede, Defying Blockade, Flies New Route to Biafra," *New York Times*, December 43, 1968, 1.

operate.<sup>31</sup> When rumors began to circulate that the Nigerian government had acquired Russian-built fighter aircraft capable of night flights, the JCA officials instructed their relief pilots to restrict night flights. JCA officials made other operational changes in response to limit the risk of attacks by Nigerian aircrafts, including a decision to stop carrying passengers. This restriction may not have affected such essential staff as the medical personnel whose services were in constant need in Biafra. The restriction, coupled with a reduction in relief supplies, had a significant impact on the sickbays, feeding centers and relief camps. For the duration of the restriction, more people starved and levels of malnutrition increased.<sup>32</sup>

The difficult war-time conditions under which the JCA relief operation was conducted is reflected in the human and material losses incurred. Remarkably, none of the crew members of the JCA's airlift operations was killed as a result of the Nigerian Air Force attacks. However, five men were injured; two flew for *Das Diakonische Werk* (German Protestants), two for Nordchurchaid (Nordic Church Relief Organizations) and one for Canairelief (Canadian Relief Organization). The three crew members of the JCA who lost their lives were those who sustained serious injuries when their aircraft crashed during landing at Uli.<sup>33</sup> Between December 9, 1968 and September 26, 1969, thirteen other members of the JCA lost their lives in circumstances other than the counter-action of the Nigerian air force. In addition to these deaths, the JCA lost five of its aircraft

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<sup>31</sup> Nordchurchaid: A Report of its operation by the Coordinating Manager, Ingvar Berg, June 10, 1970, 20, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-4.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 20-22.

through bombing and strafing. Some of the aircraft were left at Uli while some were flown back by crew members to Sao Tome, where they were eventually scrapped. About ten aircraft were seriously damaged but were repaired.<sup>34</sup> These challenges reduced the efficiency of JCA operations and the volume of relief supplies it could deliver to Biafra. While some pilots risked their lives in the operation because of their commitment to the humanitarian cause, others who earned as much as a thousand dollars each night they worked, simply saw it as a well-paying job.<sup>35</sup>

Table 2. Average Monthly Deliveries to Uli from September 1968 to January 1970<sup>36</sup>

| Year | Month     | Number | Average per night |
|------|-----------|--------|-------------------|
| 1968 | September | 207    | 7                 |
|      | October   | 237    | 7.7               |
|      | November  | 217    | 7                 |
|      | December  | 221    | 7.3               |

| Year | Month    | Number | Average per night |
|------|----------|--------|-------------------|
| 1969 | January  | 309    | 10                |
|      | February | 201    | 7.2               |

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>35</sup> Hugh McCullum, "Nigeria/Biafra: A Special 8 Page Report," *Canadian Churchman*, February 17, 1970.

<sup>36</sup> Nordchurchaid: A Report of its operation by the Coordinating Manager, Ingvar Berg, June 10, 1970, Appendix 3, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-4.



|      |              |     |      |
|------|--------------|-----|------|
|      | March        | 454 | 14.6 |
|      | April        | 323 | 10.8 |
|      | May          | 347 | 11.2 |
|      | June         | 120 | 4    |
|      | July         | 322 | 10.3 |
|      | August       | 337 | 11.2 |
|      | September    | 405 | 13   |
|      | October      | 365 | 11.6 |
|      | November     | 424 | 14.1 |
|      | December     | 545 | 17   |
| 1970 | January 1-10 | 171 | 17   |

The data above shows a total of 5,205 successful flight deliveries to Uli airport in Biafra. The highest number of deliveries was made in December 1969 with an average of 17 deliveries per night. This was followed by an average of 14.1 deliveries in the month of November 1969. The lowest average number of deliveries was made in June 1969, the month that the Nigerian Air Force shot down the ICRC relief plane. The JCA relief deliveries were drastically reduced in that month due to the fear of the “intruder” attacks. However, the average number of deliveries increased in the month of July. Criticism against the attacks likely led to a reduction in the frequent “intruder” nightly bombings. Deliveries in the month of January 1970 lasted only ten days due to the capitulation of Biafra. The data shows that the JCA aid delivery was most effective during periods when

there was a lull in fighting and less so during periods of intense hostilities between the warring parties. However, even when fighting was heavy and there were threat of attacks by Nigerian forces at the height of the war in mid-1969, JCA was still able to deliver relief aid through Uli airport.

Apart from the difficulties it encountered in relief airlift operations, the JCA also experienced a shortage of road-worthy vehicles to collect and distribute relief supplies. Most vehicles used were old and in disrepair. The World Council of Churches' report in December 1969, for instance, shows that the central stores had a total of 117 trucks but only 60 were functional enough for daily use. Some 49 of out of the 117 were undergoing repairs while 8 were reportedly missing.<sup>37</sup> The sixty trucks that were available were used by the 10 provincial headquarters of the JCA to distribute relief materials to sub-stores, camps and sick bays. Maintenance was made more difficult because of lack of local maintenance facilities and personnel as the war made it difficult for local mechanics to operate normally. The transport problem was also worsened by the occasional commandeering of the relief vehicles by the Biafran Army. Soldiers commandeered vehicles from the humanitarian agencies when they needed them. This challenge was later taken up by the JCA executive committee in Stuttgart, Germany, and representations were made to the Biafran government and military authorities to end the practice.

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<sup>37</sup> World Council of Churches Refugee Relief in Biafra, December 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8.

Consequently, the Biafran Head of State and military authorities intervened, and the commandeering was reduced to a tolerable level.<sup>38</sup>

The JCA was also faced with a shortage of capable administrative staff. Some of the individuals entrusted with the relief program lacked administrative experience to manage the large population of destitute persons for whom they were responsible.<sup>39</sup> The staffing problem was exacerbated by the policy of allowing expatriates to serve for six months and return to their home countries. This meant juggling of duties with the attendant lack of continuity in arrangements. As the war dragged on, some of the expatriates in key positions began to resign their positions.<sup>40</sup> Such resignations created administrative vacuums that required replacement with people of appropriate experiences and maturity, compromising deliveries.

The JCA's humanitarian operation in Biafra experienced some hitches in the communication network. There was no international telephone system and most of the telephone lines for local communication were out of service as a result of military action. The available land lines were also unreliable, particularly during the rainy season. The only reliable means of communication was through the relief trucks but even this had its challenges.<sup>41</sup> Some relief areas were three days away by vehicle, and some roads to the rural areas were impassable, especially during the rainy season. Radio transmitters which

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Medical Reports and Correspondence: Medical Activities Report for August 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-6-7.

<sup>40</sup> World Council of Churches Refugee Relief in Biafra, December 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8.

<sup>41</sup> Medical Reports and Correspondence: Medical Activities Report for August 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-6-7

might have offered a more reliable solution were not allowed by the Biafran government due to fear of unintentional breaches of security.<sup>42</sup> At one point in the conflict, the Biafran government confiscated radios belonging to the Swedish Red Cross because of suspected espionage.<sup>43</sup> Swedish Red Cross officials in Biafra had set up radio communications with their colleagues on the Nigerian side and had communicated in Swedish without permission from the Biafran government.<sup>44</sup> This reflected the suspicion of the Biafran government towards humanitarian agencies. Although the Biafran government officials were trustful of the church relief groups, they considered it too risky to grant humanitarian agencies permission to operate radio transmitters.

JCA workers also encountered difficulties getting entry permits to Biafra. The Biafran government insisted on following the due immigration processes required of foreigners to enter a sovereign state regardless of the person's mission. Many humanitarian workers who enthusiastically volunteered to serve under the JCA were frustrated when they were denied entry into Biafra. Delays often arose when foreigners and their sponsoring overseas organizations were unaware of the immigration procedures required for such a mission.<sup>45</sup> Fortunately, the JCA eventually persuaded the Biafran government to streamline the process for visa application.<sup>46</sup> Provision was also made for humanitarian workers seeking to enter Biafra under emergency conditions where the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Peter Worthington, "The Red Cross Has Failed," *Telegram*, February 7, 1969.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Memorandum from the Chief Immigration Officer of Biafra to the Joint Church Aid Members, March 25, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

sponsoring organization could send an applicant's biographical information to the World Council of Churches (WCC) headquarters in Biafra by cable.<sup>47</sup> The WCC in Biafra accepted full immigration responsibility for anybody that was sponsored by any member of the JCA.

### **SOVEREIGNTY VERSUS HUMANITARIANISM**

The Biafra famine caused by the Nigeria-Biafra War stimulated the largest humanitarian relief airlift since the Berlin blockade<sup>48</sup> and represented the first operation of its kind in the developing world.<sup>49</sup> Despite the incidence of the famine-induced deaths that rose to 2 million and a widespread outcry against genocide and crimes against humanity, the question of sovereignty of the warring parties remained a critical issue throughout the war.<sup>50</sup> The position taken by the combatants privileged national sovereignty over the wellbeing of ordinary citizens, thus hindering the efforts of the JCA and other humanitarian agencies to alleviate the famine in Biafra.<sup>51</sup> The Nigerian government alleged that the night airlifts operations of the JCA provided cover for clandestine air delivery of arms to Biafra and insisted that only daily relief flights

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> A Tribute to Mark the First Anniversary of the Airlift to Biafra by Raymond F. Kennedy, March 27, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-8.

<sup>49</sup> Konrad J. Kuhn, "Liberation Struggle and Humanitarian Aid: International Solidarity Movements and the Third World in the 1960s," in Samantha Christiansen and Zachary A. Scarlett eds. *The Third World in the Global 1960s* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 69.

<sup>50</sup> *Caritas Internationalis* Defines Police on Child Relief in Biafra: R. M. Bennett's Letter to Pierre Trudeau, November 4, 1968, File PCCA 1973-5005-1-14. See also US *Congressional Record* – Senate, May 16, 1969 S 5230; Spencer Rich, "Biafran Millions Seen Dying in Food Cutoff," *Washington Post*, July 2, 1969; and "A Policy of Famine" *The Times*, June 28, 1969.

<sup>51</sup> "Aid is Snarled for Starving Millions in Biafra," *New York Times*, July 3, 1969, 1.

inspected in the Nigerian capital city of Lagos would be accepted.<sup>52</sup> Okoi Arikpo, Nigeria's External Affairs Minister argued that no humanitarian consideration could justify the violation of the country's air space.<sup>53</sup> This position led to the shooting down of the Swedish Red Cross plane on June 5, 1969.<sup>54</sup> The Red Cross-marked aircraft, DC-7, flown by an American pilot, Davis Brown, was shot down by a Russian-built MIG aircraft in the course of dropping off relief at Uli Airport in Biafra.<sup>55</sup> While the Nigerian government expressed regrets at the downing of an ICRC plane, it also took the position that such unauthorized flights were always at risk.<sup>56</sup> Available evidence suggests that the order to shoot relief flights was given by the Nigerian Head of State, General Gowon, who was under pressure from his military commanders to take action against the flights.<sup>57</sup> As the war dragged on, many Nigerian military officers became restive, believing that humanitarian aid provided moral and financial support for Biafra thereby prolonging the war.<sup>58</sup>

The psychological effect of the long-drawn-out war and the inability of the Nigerian government to achieve military victory had led Nigerian officials to look for

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<sup>52</sup> Assistant Secretary for Congressional Relations' Reply to W. E. Brock on the "Recognition of Biafra," Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>53</sup> "The Relief Debate," *West Africa*, July 20, 1968, 849.

<sup>54</sup> Nigeria Summary, July 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>55</sup> Some Reasons for Current Reactions in Nigeria, July 12, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Airgram.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> Nigeria Summary, July 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

excuses and scapegoats.<sup>59</sup> The relief agencies and the American government were among the scapegoats. Many Nigerian officials believed that the relief agencies were sympathetic to Biafra. Nigeria's Information Commissioner, Anthony Enahoro for instance, noted the disappointment of many Nigerians who blamed the relief agencies for failing to take into full account the political factors involved in a civil war.<sup>60</sup> The Nigerian government accused the humanitarian agencies of being politically partisan based partly on the fact that the ICRC bypassed the government and sent a delegate to the Kampala Conference organized by the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to negotiate peace between Nigeria and Biafra.<sup>61</sup> The ICRC had sent a representative to Kampala with a plea for "an extensive lifting of blockade to enable passage of relief supplies."<sup>62</sup> The ICRC's request was based on an urgent appeal from its delegation in Biafra stating that the "liberation" of Port Harcourt by Nigerian troops had led to an influx of civilians to the centre of Biafran territory. The Nigerian government saw this as an unfriendly act. The ICRC's act which was considered an affront to Nigeria's sovereignty was one of the reasons why the Nigerian government declared the ICRC president, Auguste R. Lindt, *persona non grata* in Nigeria for allegedly favoring the "rebels."<sup>63</sup> The Nigerian government directed the same animosity towards the JCA whose attitude, they alleged, was to provide both food

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<sup>59</sup> Some Reasons for Current Reactions in Nigeria, July 12, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Airgram.

<sup>60</sup> Nigeria, October 1968, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>61</sup> FMG Blasts ICRC But Will Co-operate, May 28, 1968, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Some Reasons for Current Reactions in Nigeria, July 12, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Airgram. See also Graham Hovey, "Nigeria and Biafra: Again They Maneuver Over Starvation," *New York Times*, July 6, 1969, E2.

and ammunitions for Biafra's survival.<sup>64</sup> Graham Hovey, a correspondent of the *New York Times* observed that there was a need for scapegoats due to Nigeria's inability to crush the "rebellion" which Gowon had promised two years earlier would be a "short, surgical police action."<sup>65</sup> The increased attacks on relief planes and the eventual shooting down of one of the ICRC's relief planes, however, drew the ire and condemnation of some members of the international community and reinforced the claim that the Nigerian government was committing genocide in Biafra.

The actions of the Nigerian military forces forced the ICRC to suspend its relief operations in Biafra, leaving the JCA and the French Red Cross as the sole humanitarian organizations in Biafra. The Biafran Commissioner for Information, Ifegwu Eke, in a press conference in October 1968, noted that the shooting down of the relief plane was consistent with the Nigerian government's policy of using starvation as a legitimate instrument of war.<sup>66</sup> Some commentators believed at that time that the British government openly supported the shooting of the ICRC relief flight and orchestrated the eventual expulsion of the group from Nigeria.<sup>67</sup> The British Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Michael Stewart, defended the ICRC relief suspension in the Parliament on the grounds that it had the support of the combined relief operations.<sup>68</sup> This was quickly denied by officials of the JCA, who continued with night flights in defiance

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Graham Hovey, "Nigeria and Biafra: Again They Maneuver Over Starvation," *New York Times*, July 6, 1969, E2.

<sup>66</sup> Press Statement by Dr Ifegwu Eke, Commissioner for Information, Republic of Biafra, October 6, 1969, File NAUK, FCO/65/445/1.

<sup>67</sup> "Who is Starving the Biafrans?" November 17, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 65/446.

<sup>68</sup> "Blind Spot on Biafra," November 14, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 65/446.



of the Nigerian blockade and attacks.<sup>69</sup> The JCA operations, unlike those of ICRC, did not have the approval of the Nigerian government.

The withdrawal of the ICRC from the humanitarian operation reduced the daily relief supplies. The need for relief was estimated at 500 tons of food and medicine a day as against the 200 tons that came through the JCA night airlift.<sup>70</sup> In order to meet the required 500 tons, the relief agencies sought to negotiate alternative means of bringing in relief supplies rather than depending solely on the controversial nightly flights. The relief organizations advanced a number of proposals ranging from opening a land corridor, to a sea route, to the use of a neutral air strip that would be exclusively dedicated to the relief agencies. On each occasion, either of the belligerents had a reason to reject such proposals based on political considerations.

The land corridor was the first alternative proposal that was made at the Niamey Peace Talk in July 1968.<sup>71</sup> A demilitarized zone with international supervision was to be created from Port Harcourt through Igrita, but the Nigerian government rejected the proposal.<sup>72</sup> After much persuasion, the Nigerian government agreed to the creation of the land corridor. The Biafran leader, Ojukwu, also accepted the “mercy shipment” by land but pointed out that millions would have starved before it would be ready for the operation. Some relief agencies agreed with Ojukwu that overland relief program was

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Relief for Biafra: Paper by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, December 17, 1969, File NAUK, CAB/129/146.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

necessary but that it would take months to come into full operation.<sup>73</sup> Ojukwu suggested massive increase in relief flights before the commencement of the overland route. He also suggested that the land route should be demilitarized and without troops on either side for ten miles, outside shelling range for the duration of the war.<sup>74</sup> Later in the negotiations, Ojukwu reversed his position and rejected the land corridor option in preference for a corridor by sea using the River Niger to Oguta. He felt that the Nigerian government would convert the land corridor for military purposes against Biafra. He stated, “Nobody in his right mind would therefore expect, under an atmosphere fraught with bad faith and complete insensitivity to world opinion that the leadership of this country would hand over this key of our survival to a faithless enemy.”<sup>75</sup> The Nigerian government accepted the river route proposal but insisted that the river route should go from Warri to Asaba.<sup>76</sup> The Nigerian government rejected Biafra’s Uguta route because it was about eight miles away from Uli Airport. Accepting it as a relief route would have meant neutralizing that zone thereby shielding Uli, which was the main military target from capture.

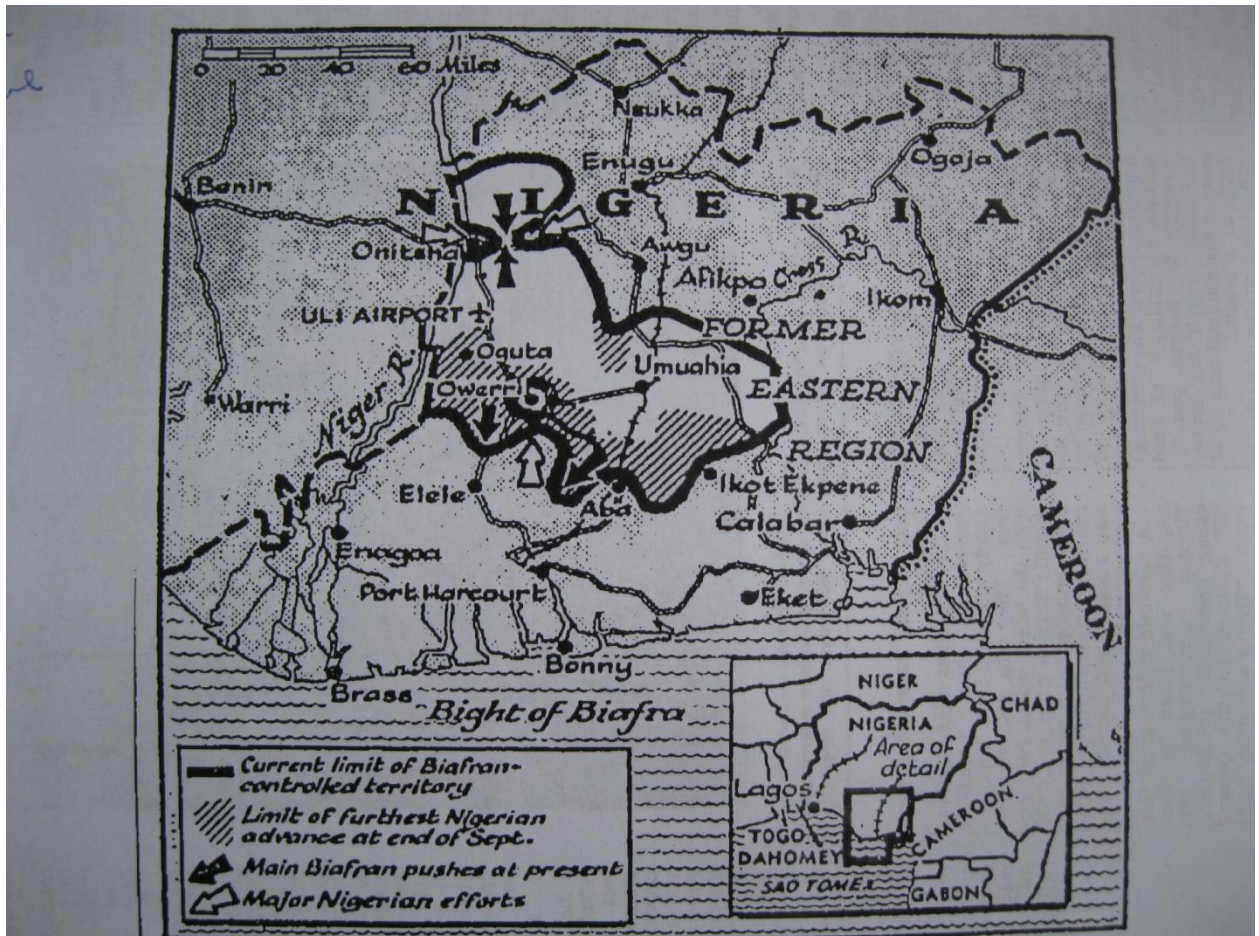
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<sup>73</sup> Dana Adams Schmidt, “Africa: Hunger as a Political Weapon in Nigeria,” *New York Times*, July 7, 1968, E3.

<sup>74</sup> Nigeria, Press Summary, July 19, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>75</sup> General Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu’s End of Year Message – 1968, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria.

<sup>76</sup> Relief for Biafra: Paper by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, December 17, 1969, File NAUK, CAB/ 129/146.



Map 1. Source: *New York Times*, March 17, 1968, 1.

Besides military considerations, Ojukwu objected to the land corridor on the grounds that food coming through the federal territory might be poisoned.<sup>77</sup> Biafrans had alleged that food introduced from Nigeria was poisoned.<sup>78</sup> To neutral observers, this might have sounded implausible, but Biafran officials strongly believed it and considered it irrational to allow food from Nigerians whom they had accused of wanting to exterminate them. Biafran officials also refused to accept any part of the £250,000

<sup>77</sup> Alvin Shuster, "In Nigeria's Civil War, Humanitarianism Comes in a Poor Second," *New York Times*, August 18, E4.

<sup>78</sup> Nigeria, Press Summary, July 19, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

donated by the British government for relief aid, arguing that it was dishonorable to accept relief aid from a government that was at the same time arming their enemies.<sup>79</sup>

Humanitarian workers in Biafra advised international donors to avoid routing any relief aid meant for Biafra through Nigeria. Father Donal O’Sullivan, a priest with the Irish Holy Ghost Order, was convinced that Biafrans would not touch any food that passed through Nigerian hands. Another Irish priest, Father Dermot Daran, asserted that Biafrans would prefer to lie down on the ground and starve to death than eat food supplied by somebody they did not know.<sup>80</sup>

Ojukwu’s refusal of the choices of the relief delivery routes afforded the British government an opportunity to convey to the international community that Ojukwu was the one obstructing peace and relief operations.<sup>81</sup> The British government which had been under intense criticism for arming Nigeria against Biafra accused Ojukwu of using the starvation of his people as a political weapon to arouse international sympathy and recognition of Biafra. The Harold Wilson-led government engaged in a media campaign against Ojukwu to counter criticisms by the Conservatives for insisting that relief must pass through channels approved by the Nigerian government.<sup>82</sup> For instance, a pamphlet

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<sup>79</sup> Dana Adams Schmidt, “Africa: Hunger as a Political Weapon in Nigeria,” *New York Times*, July 7, 1968, E3.

<sup>80</sup> Nigeria, Press Summary, July 19, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>81</sup> Anthony Lewis, “British Contend Biafrans Obstruct Peace Efforts: Also Charge Rebels Are Using Famine to Gain Sympathy in Nigerian Civil War,” *New York Times*, July 10, 1968, 3.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

published by the British government in 1969, portrayed Ojukwu as the obstacle to relief aid in Biafra.<sup>83</sup>

Although Ojukwu had hoped to establish an independent Biafran state through international support, it is unlikely that he had deliberately allowed his people to starve to death in order to achieve this. Apparently, Biafrans did not want to appear to be receiving charity from their enemy. Accepting relief supplies from the Nigerian government through the land corridors also known as “corridors of mercy” would have suggested Biafra’s dependence on Nigeria and thereby weakening Biafra’s sovereignty claim before the international community. Such dependence would have also put the Nigerian government in a position of controlling life-and-death supplies in the Biafran territory. The Nigerian government insisted that its sovereignty over Biafra must be respected by all relief agencies.<sup>84</sup> Hence, it insisted that all relief supplies must pass through its territory. These political calculations ultimately hindered the relief operations resulting in the rise of starvation and disease-induced fatalities during the war.

Another proposal to facilitate the distribution of relief supplies was put forward by an American Congressman, Allard Lowenstein, in December 1968. Lowenstein’s proposal, which later became known as Lowenstein’s Plan, suggested sending relief supplies by daylight from outside Nigeria using an airstrip at Obilago.<sup>85</sup> In order to ensure neutrality, the airstrip was to be controlled by international inspectors. For security

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<sup>83</sup> *Conflict in Nigeria: the British View* (England: Central Office of Information, 1969), 9-10.

<sup>84</sup> Lloyd Garrison, Editorial Article 2 (no title), *New York Times*, August 11, 1968, E4.

<sup>85</sup> Relief for Biafra: Paper by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, December 17, 1969, File NAUK, CAB/ 129/146.

reasons, the Biafra government was reluctant to accept this proposal. The Nigerian government, which initially agreed to the proposal and offered to allow the route to be policed by the OAU civilian observers, later withdrew its approval because the idea that “any portion of Nigeria should be internationalized and handed over to a foreign agency was unacceptable.”<sup>86</sup> Instead, the Nigerian government suggested that relief flights should come to Enugu, Biafra’s former capital, which at the time was already controlled by Nigerian forces.<sup>87</sup> From Enugu, relief supplies could be shipped by road into other parts of Biafra.

Nigerian government officials also believed that it was impossible to make sure that flights taking off from other parts of Africa did not carry arms along with food to Biafra. Moreover, Nigerian officials saw direct flights from outside Nigeria to the Biafran territory as signifying Nigeria’s recognition of Biafra as a sovereign state. The Nigerian government also believed that any advice from external bodies would have the effect of encouraging Biafra to maintain its resistance.<sup>88</sup> Ojukwu, on the hand, considered the daylight relief proposal with the conditions attached as unacceptable and tantamount to surrender.<sup>89</sup> It is also likely that Ojukwu rejected the land corridor and daylight airlift proposal because it would have hindered Biafra’s arms supply which came through the night flights. But for the uncompromising assertion of national sovereignty by both

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<sup>86</sup> Alvin Shuster, “In Nigeria’s Civil War, Humanitarianism Comes in a Poor Second,” *New York Times*, August 18, 1968, E4.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> Secretary of State’s Visit to the United Nations and Washington, October 7-15, 1968, File NAUK, FCO 38/230

<sup>89</sup> “Who is Starving Biafra?” November 17, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 65/446.

Nigerian and Biafran leaders, the Lowenstein proposal would have provided an effective solution to the starvation problem.

On August 1, 1969, the ICRC proposed another agreement on daylight flight to Biafra and Nigeria. Biafra accepted the proposal and communicated its acceptance of the technical modalities to the ICRC on August 15, 1969.<sup>90</sup> In the acceptance letter, Biafra stated that Uli, its only airport, should be open to other flights other than the relief agencies. The ICRC promised to reach an understanding with the Nigerian government based on the one it had entered into with Biafra. On September 4, 1969, the ICRC entered into an agreement with Nigeria, which contradicted the technical details it had already worked out with Biafra.<sup>91</sup> When the ICRC invited L. C. N. Obi, Biafra's coordinator on relief to Geneva, it issued him a copy of the agreement the ICRC had entered with Nigeria. No agreement was prepared with respect to Biafra. On Obi's insistence, the ICRC prepared a separate draft for Biafra. The draft was still at variance with the ICRC-Nigerian agreement. The Biafran government rejected the agreement because of some clauses that gave Nigeria some military advantage. In a meeting with the warring parties on September 9, 1969, in Geneva, the ICRC agreed to reconcile the two agreements it had worked out with Nigeria and Biafra.<sup>92</sup> The reconciliation never worked out as the belligerents continued to disagree over the technical details.

The technical details of the Biafran version differed from that of Nigeria in several ways. First, the Biafrans wanted an inspection team at the take off point which included

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<sup>90</sup> Press Statement by Dr Ifegwu Eke, Commissioner for Information, Republic of Biafra, October 6, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 65/445/1.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

the representatives of Biafra and Nigeria. The Nigerian version created a control commission which excluded Biafran representatives. The control commission would decide the relief material to be carried by each flight. The Biafran position was that a standard list of relief materials should be agreed on in advance and that the inspection team should satisfy itself that only such commodities were carried by relief aircraft. The JCA had proposed relief supplies to be carried by daylight flights including medicine, food, clothing, hospital supplies and other materials that the operating relief agencies deemed necessary.<sup>93</sup> Biafra wanted the use of at least two airports in Republic of Benin, Sao Tome and Equatorial Guinea while Nigeria wanted the Republic of Benin to be the only staging point. Furthermore, the flight routes which Biafra worked out with ICRC were different from the one the ICRC worked out with the Nigerian government. The most important part of the agreement between the ICRC and the Nigerian government was the section that empowered the Nigerian government to select aircraft for inspection in Lagos and to carry out military activities within the relief corridor during relief transportation operations.<sup>94</sup> F. J. Cookey, Biafra's Commissioner for Special Duties, who negotiated with the ICRC on behalf of Biafra, advised the Biafran leader, Col Ojukwu to reject the agreement.<sup>95</sup> In his accounts of the events, Cookey stated that he recommended vetoing the agreement because Nigerian officials influenced the ICRC to include some

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<sup>93</sup> Hugh G. Lloyd, Mona L. Mollerup and Carl A. Bratved, *The Nordchurchaid Airlift*, 212.

<sup>94</sup> Nigeria: Relief for Biafra: Notes by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, December 17, 1969, File NAUK, CAB/129/146.

<sup>95</sup> "Can Biafra Survive?" by Jonathan Aitken, October 8, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 65/446.



supplementary clauses, one of which read: “This agreement shall be without prejudice to military operation by the FMG.”<sup>96</sup>

The Biafran government interpreted this clause to mean that the Federal Military Government had the power to send bombers behind the Red Cross planes to destroy the Biafran airport at Uli. It also considered a recall of planes that had already been inspected a means to frustrate the relief operation.<sup>97</sup> The ICRC sent its officials to secure Biafra’s agreement and to assure it that it was protected against such federal government attack by world opinion.<sup>98</sup> In addition, the Pope sent Monsignor Bayer to Biafra to persuade Ojukwu to accept the terms of agreement reached between the ICRC and the Nigerian government.<sup>99</sup> For a government that had Uli Airport as its only lifeline and link to the outside world, courting world opinion was less important than the strategic value of the airport. The Nigerian government, however, clarified the controversial clause by stating that the Nigerian Air Force would never attack Uli airport while the relief agencies were engaged in operations.<sup>100</sup> Every effort to persuade Biafra to accept the agreement without a third party guarantee failed. Although the JCA was not part of the negotiation between the ICRC and the warring parties, it strongly supported all initiatives that would allow the relief agencies to operate daylight flights without military harassment.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> Nigeria: Relief for Biafra: Notes by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, December 17, 1969, File NAUK, CAB/129/146.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Nigeria: Vatican Mediation (no date), File NAUK, FCO 65/305.

<sup>100</sup> Nigeria: Relief for Biafra: Notes by the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, December 17, 1969, File NAUK, CAB/129/146.

<sup>101</sup> Emmanuel Urhobo, *Relief Operations in the Nigerian Civil War* (Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1978), 34.

Several observers reacted strongly to relief obstruction couched in terms of national sovereignty. A legal scholar, Arthur Allen Leff, noted, “Sovereignty is nice, I suppose, if games like that amuse you, but babies exist. They have no countries but their mothers, no cause but their lives and no salvation but food and love.”<sup>102</sup> For Leff, children did not understand ideology, sovereignty or international law and should not have died for what they did not know. Leff’s view was shared by other concerned individuals and groups. An advertisement by the American Committee to Keep Biafra Alive, a committee that strongly campaigned for humanitarian relief for Biafra stated, “these children do not understand the crime of being Ibo or living in Biafra.”<sup>103</sup> Many people saw children as innocent victims of the war politics. Nevertheless, for countries such as Britain, Nigeria’s sovereignty was supreme. Britain argued that Nigeria was a newly independent country and should jealously guard its sovereignty.<sup>104</sup> The British government’s position was that, if any relief organization must succeed in its operation, such organization must respect the “susceptibilities” of the Nigerian government.<sup>105</sup> This statement was made in connection with what the British government considered highhandedness as well as one-sided approach of the ICRC in dealing with the Nigerian government.<sup>106</sup> On its own part, the Nigerian government regarded any external pressure on the relief issue as a product of “white,” European and American “moral superiority,” that had to be resisted.<sup>107</sup> While the

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<sup>102</sup> Arthur Allen Leff, “Food for Biafrans,” *New York Times*, October 4, 1968, 46.

<sup>103</sup> “These Children Don’t Understand,” *New York Times*, September 24, 1968.

<sup>104</sup> Secretary of State’s Visit to the United Nations and Washington, October 7-15, 1968, File NAUK, FCO 38/230.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

Nigerian government employed starvation to induce Biafra to surrender, the Biafran government used the posters of the starving children to sustain the politics of the war. The humanitarian agencies on the other hand used the posters of the children suffering from kwashiorkor to support their campaign for humanitarian aid. Children, thus, became part of the symbol of the Biafran struggle. Hence Reverend Father Kevin Doheny, a missionary in Biafra, described the conflict as “children’s war.”<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> “In Biafra, Death by Famine Strikes Everywhere: Relief Aided Insist Massive Airlift is the Only Hope for Salvation,” *New York Times*, July 30, 1968, 12.

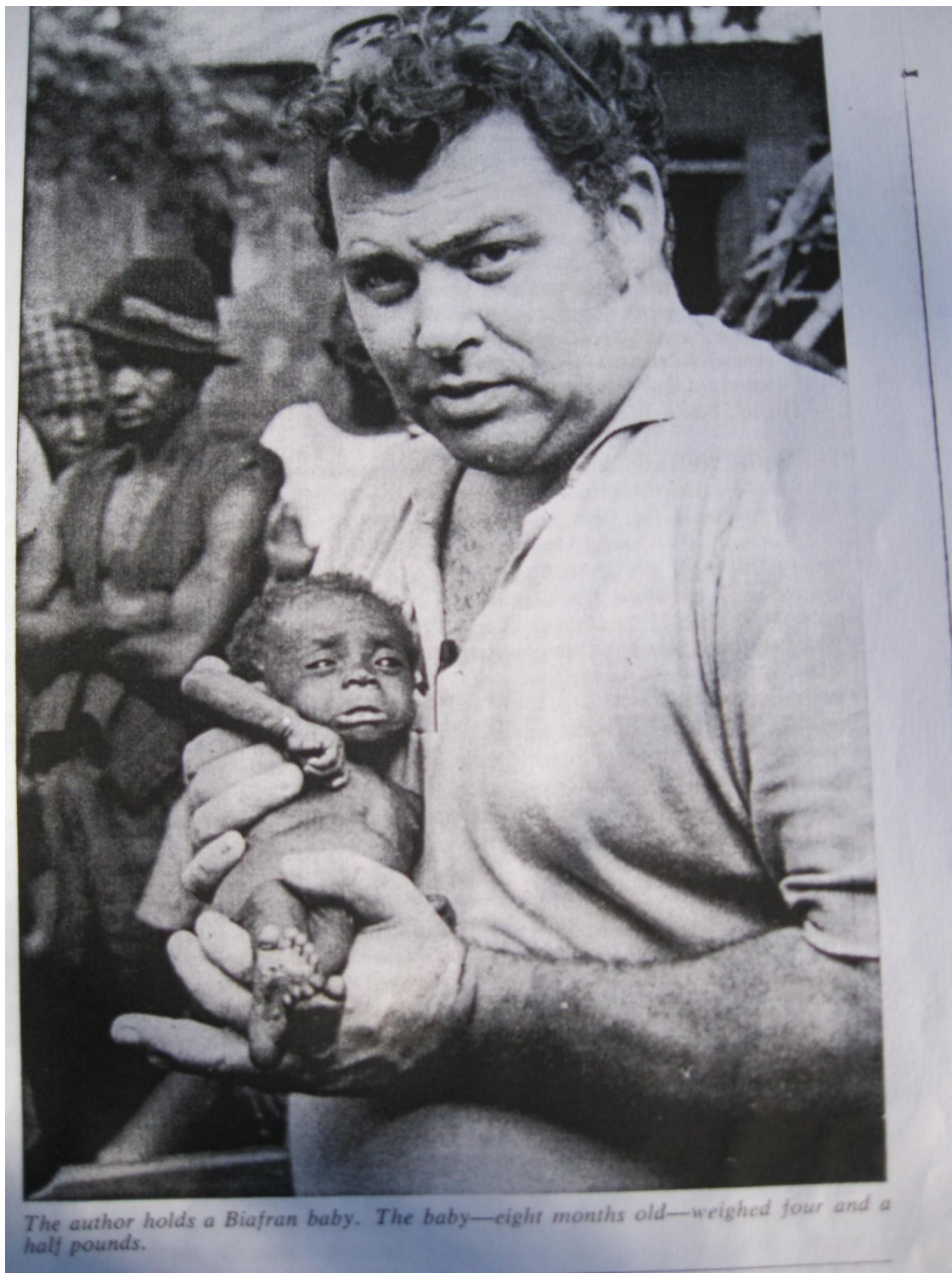


Figure 3. Source: *The United Church Observer*, February 15, 1970, 12.

To exonerate itself from any blame, the Nigerian government published a two-page advertisement on the *New York Times* giving details of how it had aided the victims of the war in Biafra.<sup>109</sup> The \$14,020 advertisement which was organized by Moses Ihonde of the Consulate General's office in New York and Timothy Adebajo, the Nigerian Embassy's First Secretary in the US, was aimed at presenting the Nigerian government account of the humanitarian crisis in Biafra.<sup>110</sup> The Nigerian government argued that it had allowed relief into Biafra to ease the suffering of the civilian masses. This claim suggested that the continued existence of the Uli Airport was possible only because the Nigerian government allowed it. This claim was incorrect because the Nigerian government had blockaded Biafra and opposed any attempt by the relief agencies to bring in relief without its authorization.<sup>111</sup> More importantly, the Nigerian government wanted to crush the Biafran "rebellion" as quickly as possible and had made statements demonstrating that it was using starvation as a legitimate instrument of warfare. The Vice Chairman of the Supreme Military Council of Nigeria and Federal Commissioner, Ministry of Finance, Obafemi Awolowo, stated "All is fair in war, and starvation is one of the weapons of war."<sup>112</sup> Awolowo made this statement after the shooting down of the Red

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<sup>109</sup> "The Relief Debate," *West Africa*, July 20, 1968, 849.

<sup>110</sup> "Nigerians Buy an Ad to Clarify Position," *New York Times*, July 6, 1968, 3.

<sup>111</sup> "In Biafra, Death by Famine Strikes Everywhere: Relief Aided Insist Massive Airlift is the Only Hope for Salvation," *New York Times*, July 30, 1968, 12. See also "Nigeria Rules Out Airlift to Biafra: Warns that Planes Will Fire on Unauthorized Flights Carrying Relief Aid," *New York Times*, July 6, 1968.

<sup>112</sup> "Starvation the Weapon," *New York times*, July 2, 1969, 42.

Cross relief plane. The Army Chief of Staff of the Nigerian government, Brigadier Hassan Katsina, made a similar remark regarding the use of starvation in war.<sup>113</sup>

Bearing in mind that the Nigerian government wanted the war to be concluded as quickly as possible, it would have done anything possible to put the Uli airport out of use and thereby cut off Biafra's arms supply. The Nigerian Air Force made several attempts to destroy the Biafran airport but failed. Its Egyptian pilots could not fly low enough to cause substantial damage because of Biafran anti-aircraft guns and Nigeria lacked trained pilots that could do the job.<sup>114</sup> Ground attacks on the airport were also hindered by heavy Biafran defenses that included mined roads and a mile-long zigzag trench that was four feet deep.<sup>115</sup> Thus, the continued existence of Uli Airport was not an act of mercy on the part of the Nigerian government to allow relief into Biafra, but a result of military weakness and the inefficiency of the Nigerian Air Force. Furthermore, the persistence of mass starvation in the "liberated" areas under Nigerian control undermined the Nigerian claim that it was concerned about the plight of the helpless victims of the war.<sup>116</sup> If there was an honest concern to bring food to the starving population, it would have been evident in the "liberated" areas under Nigerian government control. Some of these complexities in the relief issue lent credence to the Biafran claim that cessation of hostilities would lead to mass reprisals from the Nigerian government.

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<sup>113</sup> "A Policy of Famine," *The Times*, June 28, 1968.

<sup>114</sup> Nigeria Press Summary, October 24, 1968, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> "People before Politics," *New York Times*, August 13, 1968, 38.

From the foregoing, it is evident that the sovereignty issue obstructed the delivery of humanitarian aid to the war victims in Biafra. An agreement between Nigeria and Biafra proved fruitless mainly because both parties wanted conditions that would be favorable to their claims to sovereignty. Part of the complication in the relief struggle was that Biafran arms and humanitarian relief entered Biafra through Uli. It was against this background that the Nigerian government concluded that the survival of Nigeria as a united country depended on taking action not only against Biafra's military forces but also against the humanitarian agencies whose activities it saw as unnecessarily prolonging the war.<sup>117</sup>

### **AN ASSESSMENT OF THE JCA AS A HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATION**

The role of the JCA in the Nigeria-Biafra War raises several important moral and political questions. The concept of humanitarianism, which literally means doing good, generated multiple interpretations in the Nigeria-Biafra War, and it was difficult to draw a line between politics and humanitarianism in the conflict. Some of those who sympathized with the Nigerian cause argued that since rebellion is a political question and humanitarian aid helps sustain rebellion, the political question cannot be clearly divorced from the humanitarian question.<sup>118</sup> This argument can also be connected to the delicate

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<sup>117</sup> Some Reasons for Current Reactions in Nigeria, July 12, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Airgram.

<sup>118</sup> Nigerian Press Round-up, July 13 and 14, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

link between the philosophical question of *res publica* (public or state affairs) and *res divinae* (divine matters or service to God). The traditional notion that the church's foundation and existence is divine and should be insulated against state politics seemed to have led to the divergent opinions and criticisms against the JCA as a humanitarian organization.

The World Council of Churches, Caritas, the German, Scandinavian, Dutch and Canadian churches joined forces under the umbrella of JCA to save victims of the war in Biafra. The determination of the churches to bring relief to Biafrans was commended by many observers. The coming together of these groups represented a unique occasion where Christian churches exhibited an uncommon ecumenicalism by overlooking their theological differences for a humanitarian cause in a distant land. Although there were political odds against this humanitarian project, the leaders of the churches felt they were obeying the biblical injunction, "Feed my children."<sup>119</sup> It was this command to feed the hungry that primarily drove the Christian churches into the humanitarian project in Biafra. In the view of the church leaders who formed the JCA, the injunction to feed the children had to be obeyed irrespective of the difficulty of the conditions. Hugh McCullum, editor of the *Canadian Churchman* (A publication of the Anglican Church of Canada), noted that the command was simply, "Feed my lambs... As you have done unto the least of these my brethren, you have done unto me."<sup>120</sup> This provided the theological grounds for church humanitarianism in Biafra. Church leaders believed that state

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<sup>119</sup> McCullum, "Biafra," *The United Church Observer*, February 15, 1970.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*



sovereignty and diplomatic niceties were irrelevant in the discharge of this Christian duty. Pope Paul VI re-echoed this order when he stated with reference to the war that “people are more important than politics.”<sup>121</sup> The starvation problem in Biafra and efforts to bring relief to the war victims sparked off a new kind of missionary zeal that led some Nigerian leaders to worry about what they described as a new wave of missionary territorial ambition.<sup>122</sup>

While the church could be said to have successfully performed this historic role of saving millions of lives in Biafra, some also believed that the church was involved in the war politics. To many Nigerians, humanitarian support to Biafra was support for secession. They believed that from the beginning of the conflict, the Roman Catholic Church played a role calculated to help Ojukwu break up Nigeria.<sup>123</sup> Those who held this view argued that the Catholic Church had done this through its charity organization, Caritas, which was accused of carrying out an extensive propaganda campaign aimed at winning sympathy and material support for the Biafrans.<sup>124</sup> One senior Nigerian official, J. T. Obaoye, alleged that Christian organizations in Nigeria, particularly the Catholics who were the sponsors of Caritas, were interfering in the internal affairs of Nigeria.<sup>125</sup> Obaoye urged bishops in Nigeria to declare their stance in the crisis and argued that the

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<sup>121</sup> Catholic Relief Services, Nigeria-Biafra Relief, Summer Edition 1968, 7, File NAE, MPS/X6.

<sup>122</sup> “Vatican and the Rebels,” *Morning Post*, November 30, 1968.

<sup>123</sup> “The Roman Catholic Church and the Nigerian Crisis,” *Morning Post*, December 2, 1968.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> “Christian Missions Are Warned Not to Meddle in Nigerian Crisis,” *New Nigerian* December 3, 1968.

silence of Nigerian Bishops' gave the impression that the Catholic authority in Nigeria was supporting "the arms-laden humanitarian activities of the Caritas."<sup>126</sup>

The war-time Nigerian military commander, Col. Benjamin Adekunle, blamed the Christian church for the war. Clearly exaggerating for effect, Adekunle insisted that the Pope had more influence in world affairs than the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. He asserted, "The Vatican has agents everywhere in the world, and the Vatican has decided that Biafra must win."<sup>127</sup> For Adekunle's rival, Col. Joseph Achuzie, commander of Biafra's Elite Strike Division, the war was fought for religious reasons and not political.<sup>128</sup> Col. Achuzie believed that the Muslims of Northern Nigeria were determined to exterminate the Christians of Biafra.

For diplomatic reasons, the churches did not want to get involved in the conflict.<sup>129</sup> This reluctance was not always evident in the course of the conflict as church organizations sometimes showed sympathy towards Biafra. One observer claimed that Catholic priests, especially the Irish, created the impression that they were ready to exchange their white cassock for camouflage smocks to lead an attack.<sup>130</sup> Similar views about Catholic political and military support for Biafra were assumptions based on the deep humanitarian commitment of the Catholic priests. There is no evidence that the priests were ever involved in military combat. Although priests might not have taken up

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Peter Worthington, "The Church and Biafran Politics, *Telegram*, March 15, 1969.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Tony Byrne, *Airlift to Biafra: Breaching the Blockade* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 1997), 73.

<sup>130</sup> Peter Worthington, "The Church and Biafran Politics, *Telegram*, March 15, 1969.

arms for the Biafran cause, they certainly played other roles that were considered supportive of Biafran secession. For instance, a group that described itself as “Catholic Bishops of Biafra,” signed an open letter in July 1969, appealing to the world community to support the war victims in Biafra with relief.<sup>131</sup> The letter suggested that the Bishops recognized the existence of Biafra as a sovereign state. The Nigerian and British governments felt uneasy about the letter because such a letter signed by five bishops, one of whom was a European, had the potential of influencing public opinion about the war in Europe and North America. The Nigerian government interpreted the letter as signifying that the Roman Catholic Church had taken sides with Biafra. The British government also considered it prejudicial to the Vatican’s attempt to mediate in the conflict.<sup>132</sup> The letter was considered damaging to the efforts of the Catholic Church and other Christian groups to achieve moderation and compromise settlement in the conflict. The letter also became powerful propaganda for the Biafran government, which presented the Roman Catholic Church as supporting their cause.<sup>133</sup>

In response to the pro-Biafra letter, the Catholic Archbishop of Lagos Diocese, Most Reverend J. K. Aggey, led a delegation of three Nigerian Bishops to Pope Paul VI.<sup>134</sup> The delegation hoped to receive a clear directive from the Pope on the legitimate role of the Nigerian Catholic Episcopal Conference in the conflict. In their meeting with

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<sup>131</sup> Open Letter Containing World Appeal Sent by the Catholic Bishops of Biafra, July 30, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 65/305.

<sup>132</sup> Nigeria: Memorandum from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to Michael Williams, British Legation, The Holy See, August 11, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 65/305.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

<sup>134</sup> Memorandum on the Visit of the Roman Catholic Bishops in Nigeria to Rome by J. E. Smallwood, December 21, 1968, File NAUK, FCO 65/305.

the Pope, the delegation alerted the Pope to the dangers of possible backlash to Catholic members in Nigeria as a result of negative publicity against the political positions of Catholic humanitarian agencies. The bishops reminded the Pope that the war was not yet a religious war but could easily become so if the Catholic agencies continued to suggest that.<sup>135</sup> Bishop Richard Finn of Ibadan Diocese observed that the Pope was sympathetic and well informed about the Nigerian Catholic perspectives on the crisis.<sup>136</sup> The Pope subsequently held a private meeting with the archbishops of Nigeria and Biafra. In his address to the College of Cardinals in 1969, the Pope mentioned the Nigeria-Biafra conflict as one of the three major questions facing the international community. Pope Paul stated that he had worked unceasingly not only to send Vatican relief supplies to the people in need but to support every initiative aimed at ensuring relief supplies however limited and inadequate.<sup>137</sup> Rather than allaying concerns about the Catholic churches' pro-Biafra bias, the Pope's statement seemed to have reinforced them.

Some Nigerian critics wondered whether the church had deviated from its original mission in favor of territorial annexation.<sup>138</sup> To many Nigerians, the Catholic Church was not simply meddling in the internal affairs of the country. They also believed that the church had made the Holy See the center for raising funds and recruiting mercenaries for Biafra.<sup>139</sup> While this anti-Vatican view was held among Nigerian officials, there is no

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Nigeria: Memorandum from the Holy See to Foreign and Commonwealth Office by Sir M. Williams, December 16, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 65/305.

<sup>138</sup> "Vatican and the Rebels," *Morning Post*, November 30, 1968.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

evidence to suggest that the Vatican was engaged in any covert military or political role in the conflict. Its role remained largely humanitarian. In his speech in June 1968, the Pope reiterated his determination “to do anything, to undertake whatever initiative that lies within our power to promote peaceful negotiations” adding that the Holy See would not take sides with either of the parties in the conflict and had no vested interest in one solution or another.<sup>140</sup>

Amidst growing skepticism in Nigeria, other church leaders sought to clarify the role of the Catholic Church in the conflict. At the height of the war in 1968, Bishop Finn condemned some Catholic leaders for revealing their bias in the conflict. He stated that the policy and activities of Caritas at its headquarters in Rome was perfectly genuine, but noted that it was possible some Catholic leaders outside the headquarters were not strictly following directives from Rome.<sup>141</sup> However, some Catholic priests in Biafra did not hide their positions in the conflict. Bishop Joseph Whelan of Owerri Diocese, of Irish stock and one of the “Catholic Bishops of Biafra,” reportedly referred to Nigerians as “the enemy,” and to the Biafran troops as “our boys.”<sup>142</sup> On occasions when he had to travel overseas, the bishop would whimsically say, “Off to make a bit of propaganda.”<sup>143</sup> During Bishop Whelan’s visit to Toronto in March 1969, he participated in a church event where he showed visiting newsmen the evidence of bombed feeding centers, schools and hospitals in Biafra.

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<sup>140</sup> Pope’s Summer Allocution: Nigeria by Sir M. Williams, June 26, 1969, File NAUK, FCO 65/305.

<sup>141</sup> “ABP Aggey Leads Team to Rome” Newspaper clipping, File NAUK, FCO 65/308.

<sup>142</sup> Peter Worthington, “The Church and Biafran Politics, *Telegram*, March 15, 1969.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

In Britain, the Catholic and Protestant community found reasons to unite in favor of Biafra. For instance, Westminster Abbey broke a three-hundred-year old tradition by providing a venue for the sermon of a United Kingdom-based Roman Catholic Cardinal who was known to be pro-Biafran. Cardinal Heenan stated in his sermon that the war against communism in Vietnam was a holier encounter than the Nigerian government struggle to preserve its national independence and territorial integrity.<sup>144</sup> Propaganda and the church's humanitarian project were mutually reinforcing. The humanitarian crisis created a potent message for propaganda. On the other hand, church groups needed propaganda for fundraising and to sustain their humanitarian work. It was largely the churches' propaganda that moved the conscience of ordinary Christians in Europe and North America to leave their jobs to go to Biafra to help distribute relief supplies to the starving population. It was the same message that encouraged ordinary people in these countries to donate money towards the humanitarian efforts. These initiatives had a significant impact on church humanitarianism. For example, the aircraft purchased by Canarelief (Canadian relief organization for Biafra) in December 1968 for relief operations in Biafra, was made possible by the efforts of the ordinary people in the church. For the church, propaganda was not essentially a political project to help the Biafran independence struggle but part of the broader effort to sustain the humanitarian project. Without effective persuasion of the masses, it would have been difficult to sustain humanitarian work.

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<sup>144</sup> "The Foreign Coalition Against Nigeria," *Nigerian Opinion*, 4, nos 7-9, October 1968.

As shown earlier, the Nigeria-Biafra war prompted church groups to form the JCA as a unique humanitarian project. However, in other respects, the war also created divisions within and between church organizations. The issue of how to operationalize humanitarian relief threatened the unity of the Catholic Church and divided opinions within the Protestant world body, the World Council of Churches (WCC).<sup>145</sup> The WCC was initially committed to providing relief aid to the Nigeria-Biafra War victims through the Christian Council of Nigeria, the Christian Council of Biafra and the International Committee of the Red Cross and had contributed about \$5 million to the project.<sup>146</sup> This did not sit well with the Nigerian government and Christian Council of Nigeria which both argued that the WCC had taken sides in the conflict through its relief supplies.<sup>147</sup> Even though the Christian council of Nigeria also received relief supplies from the WCC, it agreed with the Nigeria government that relief to Biafra meant support for rebellion. In defense of its position, the central committee of the WCC maintained that its emergency relief program was motivated “only by the demands of the Gospel to serve human need and suffering.”<sup>148</sup> The Protestant Churches maintained that the only solution to the problem was the ending of the fighting and the achievement of a negotiated settlement.<sup>149</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> The Protestant churches in humanitarian operation in Biafra unofficially operated under the name, WCC as well as Christian Council of Biafra (CCB). Thus, WCC and CCB were interchangeably used.

<sup>146</sup> “World Council of Churches Calls for Safe Routes for Relief Supplies to Biafra,” *New York Times*, August 23, 1969, 11.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>149</sup> Urhobo, *Relief Operations*, 33.

As pressure mounted on the WCC (the Protestant arm of the JCA) from the Nigerian government over the political implications of relief supplies in the war, some officials of the WCC began to entertain doubts about the policy of providing humanitarian aid in Biafra. A WCC committee chaired by Reverend E. E. Long, Secretary of the United Church's General Council, questioned the wisdom of the JCA's relief flights, arguing that they were prolonging the war by giving Biafrans the hope that they would finally succeed in their independence struggle.<sup>150</sup> Evidently, the WCC's humanitarian role in the conflict, especially as it concerned religious propaganda, worried many Christians in Nigeria who had come under constant attack of the Nigerian media.<sup>151</sup> In 1968, Nigerian Christian delegates to the Fourth Assembly of the WCC in Uppsala engaged their unofficial Biafran counterparts led by Akanu Ibiam (WCC Vice President) in a dispute over the church's position in the conflict.<sup>152</sup> The Nigerian Christians led a series of media attack on the JCA's humanitarian action while Biafran Christians countered in support of humanitarian action.<sup>153</sup> In protest, the Christian Council of Nigeria relaxed its efforts in bringing relief to the "liberated" areas under the control of the Nigerian troops.<sup>154</sup> As a result of the friction within the Protestant Church, the WCC asked the JCA to suspend its policy of sending relief to Biafra and denounced Pastor

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<sup>150</sup> McCullum, "Biafra," *The United Church Observer*, February 15, 1970.

<sup>151</sup> Nicholas Ibeawuchi Omenka, "Blaming the Gods: Christian Religious Propaganda in the Nigeria-Biafra War," *Journal of African History*, 51, 2010, 383.

<sup>152</sup> Christopher Steed and Bengt Sundkler, *History of the Church in Africa* (Port Chester: Cambridge Press, 2000), 953.

<sup>153</sup> Omenka, "Blaming the Gods," 387.

<sup>154</sup> Urhobo, *Relief Operations*, 31-32.



Lothar Kuhl (German Evangelical Church Delegate for Biafra) for his efforts to raise funds for relief supplies in Biafra.<sup>155</sup>

The World Council of Churches did not want to be entangled with what it considered the political and military issues of the war. The WCC's committee's decision to stop humanitarian aid in Biafra was welcomed by the Nigerian government, but this created a division within the WCC. While some members of the WCC saw this decision as an effort to distance the church from the political controversies of the war, others defiantly continued with the relief supplies and interpreted the action as undermining the humanitarian work in Biafra which involved the co-operation of 33 church relief organizations from 22 different countries.<sup>156</sup> The committee's decision to discourage relief work in Biafra also represented a contradiction of WCC's earlier claim that its humanitarian aid to Biafra was based on the Christian mandate to "serve human need and suffering."<sup>157</sup> Nonetheless, the decision of the WCC failed to achieve the intended object of discouraging the JCA's humanitarian effort as the JCA continued to provide food and other relief aids until Biafra capitulated on January 12, 1970.

The argument as to whether humanitarian aid played a psychological or material role in prolonging the war is hard to determine. This question is particularly contentious,

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<sup>155</sup> Christian Council in Biafra, 1968-1969: Dr Clyne Shepherd's Reply to E. H. Johnson, Secretary for Overseas Mission, Presbyterian Church, Canada, September 10, 1968, File PCCA 1973-5005-5-8.

<sup>156</sup> "Church Unit Cold to Biafran Relief: World Council Says Flights Only Prolong Civil War," *New York Times*, December 6, 1969, 49. See also Hugh McCullum, "Biafra: an Obituary," *The United Church Observer*, February 15, 1970, 13.

<sup>157</sup> "World Council of Churches Calls for Safe Routes for Relief Supplies to Biafra," *New York Times*, August 23, 1969, 11.

in view of the fact that there were other external actors involved in the conflict. Scholarly opinion on this is also divided. The author and journalist, Philip Gourevitch stated: “Had it not been for the West’s charity, the Nigerian civil war surely would have ended much sooner.”<sup>158</sup> For Gourevitch, the argument about the lives that were saved through relief aid should be weighed against the lives that were also lost following the prolongation of the conflict. Other scholars such as Ndubisi Obiaga have dismissed this argument as a distortion of the reality.<sup>159</sup> Similarly, N. U Akpan, who was Secretary to the Biafran government, argued that even if the war had not lasted long, far more innocent civilians would have died without relief aid.<sup>160</sup> Significantly, other groups were also accused of prolonging the war. Writing during the war, at the University of Ibadan, a group of professors alleged that some members of the Gowon-led military regime were deliberately prolonging the war so as to remain in power and amass personal financial gains.<sup>161</sup> In an address to the United Nations General Assembly in 1968, the French Foreign Affairs Minister, Michel Debré, accused those supplying arms to Nigeria of prolonging the war.<sup>162</sup> Debré was referring to Britain and Russia that were known to have provided the military hardware that sustained Nigerian’s military effort in the conflict.

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<sup>158</sup> Philip Gourevitch, “Alms Dealers: Can You Provide Humanitarian Aid Without Facilitating Conflict?,” *New Yorker*, October 11, 2010.

<sup>159</sup> Ndubisi Obiaga, *The Politics of Humanitarian Organizations Intervention* (Maryland: University Press of America, 2004), 94.

<sup>160</sup> N. U. Akpan, *The Struggle for Secession, 1966-1970: A Personal Account of the Nigerian Civil War* (London: Frank Cass, 1972), 160.

<sup>161</sup> Nigerian Press Round-up, December 30, 1968, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>162</sup> Memorandum from Robert D. Baum to Ambassador Joseph Palmer, December 31, 1968, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria.

Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss have described debates as to whether relief aid prolongs conflicts as a thorny issue.<sup>163</sup> Given that there is no comprehensive record to show the statistics of deaths and lives saved during the war, it is difficult to conclude that more people died as a result of the humanitarian aid than were saved. To argue that humanitarian aid prolonged the Nigeria-Biafra war is to ignore the fact that some European countries such as Britain, the USSR and France also played crucial roles in the war. These countries provided significant military and diplomatic support without which the war might have ended earlier than it did. Great power politics undoubtedly played a role in both the course and outcome of the war.<sup>164</sup> Those who argue that the humanitarian effort contributed in prolonging the war also neglect the salient political and economic realities in the conflict. Although colonial rule and ethnic animosities laid the foundation for the outbreak of the war, the war was also triggered by the struggle for control over oil and other resources. Nigerian and Biafran leaders as well as British companies under the Shell-British Petroleum joint venture all had stakes in gaining and maintaining access to the oil resources in Nigeria's Niger delta. In view of these factors, it is simplistic to argue that humanitarian aid prolonged the Nigeria-Biafra War.

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<sup>163</sup> Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss, *Humanitarianism Contested: Where Angels Fear to Tread* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 55. See also Ina Merdjanova and Patrice Brodeur, *Religion as a Conversation Starter: Interreligious Dialogue for Peace-building in the Balkans* (London: Continuum, 2009); John Hannigan, *Disaster Without Borders: The International Politics of Natural Disasters* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2012), 56; Adrian Hastings, *A History of African Christianity, 1950-1975* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>164</sup> Conversation with HIM, February 20, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria. I have not explored these aspects of the conflict in detail here for reasons of scope and space. The principal focus of this study is the humanitarian role of the JCA.

JCA officials strongly contested any suggestion that humanitarian activities prolonged the war. As one JCA spokesperson argued, the church groups were guided simply by the biblical principle that “people cannot be left to starve.”<sup>165</sup> At a meeting in Norway in December 1969, the Joint Church Aid reaffirmed its decision to continue and if possible increase the relief supplies.<sup>166</sup> In its response to the WCC’s committee decision in December 1969, the JCA stated that it was conscious of the political side effect of the humanitarian work in Nigeria and Biafra but was left with no choice. JCA argued that any attempt to stop relief supplies to Biafra would not only have political consequences but would also lead to deaths of millions of innocent civilians, thereby establishing starvation as a legitimate instrument of war. To justify its decision to continue with the relief operation, the JCA asserted: “Relief is based on divine law which commands that above all we serve our neighbor and we have no alternative but to continue relief work as long as it is an effective means of alleviating the present suffering.”<sup>167</sup>

JCA’s resolution on the Biafran relief shows that the organization was conscious of the political implications of its action. It also suggests that JCA was caught in a moral dilemma. Stopping relief might have been interpreted as complicity with the Nigerian government. The JCA tried to disentangle itself from the political debate over its humanitarian action by describing its role simply in terms of the divine mandate – feed

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<sup>165</sup> “Church Unit Cold to Biafra Relief: World Council Says Flights Only Prolong Civil War,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1969, 49.

<sup>166</sup> McCullum, “Biafra: An Obituary,” *The United Church Observer*, February 15, 1970.

<sup>167</sup> Nordchurchaid: A Report of its operation by the Coordinating Manager, Ingvar Berg, June 10, 1970, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-4. See also Urhobo, *Relief Operation*, 35.

the hungry.<sup>168</sup> By declaring that relief was based on a divine law, JCA officials sought to elevate their humanitarian action above domestic or international war politics. Such an interpretation of humanitarianism as a sacred duty usually renders it a moral act and independent of political power.<sup>169</sup>

While the JCA sought to ground its humanitarian action within Christian ethics and morality, the WCC's change of policy attracted the ire of some prominent church leaders who expressed personal disappointment over what they described as the WCC compromise of its Christian and humanitarian principles.<sup>170</sup> The Roman Catholic head of Caritas, Bishop Godfrey Okoye, stated:

I feel as though I've been stabbed in the back. At a time when we are working so closely together, when Christians from all parts of the world and from all theological persuasions are together, the World Council seems to have betrayed us. We ask only that the WCC put politics aside and think of the needy and starving.<sup>171</sup>

The disparities between the JCA and WCC positions on humanitarian action reflect the tension that existed among the church groups and the determination of the JCA to defy every opposition to relief aid without being dragged into political debates of the war.

In his reminiscences of the war, Emmanuel Urhobo, who coordinated the Christian Council of Nigeria's relief aid, argued that the JCA's operation in Biafra was

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<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

<sup>169</sup> Michael Barnett and Janice Gross Stein, *Sacred Aid: Faith and Humanitarianism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 224-225.

<sup>170</sup> McCullum, "Biafra," *The United Church Observer*, February 15, 1970.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

seen in Nigeria as being politically and emotionally identified with the Biafran cause.<sup>172</sup>

Apart from the negative effect on the relationship within the church groups on both sides, the international publicity that the JCA received left many people with the impression that the war was really a religious one between Muslims and Christians.<sup>173</sup> The WCC committee was particularly concerned that the humanitarian effort was being indirectly used by some governments to “pursue their own ends and thereby achieve their own goals.”<sup>174</sup> This was also a common feeling among Nigerian officials because the JCA members received supports from governments and private individuals.

Prominent Church leaders such as E. H. Johnson, who was in charge of the Presbyterian missionary programs in Africa, Japan and India, were criticized by some Nigerians for their active roles in the humanitarian effort. Okoi Arikpo, Nigeria’s External Affairs Commissioner and a leader in the Presbyterian Church in Lagos stated in 1969 “Many of us are grieved that Moderator E. H. Johnson... is associated with activities that cast doubt on the Canadian Church’s sincerity. Surely many of his Presbyterian colleagues share in our grief that Mr Johnson has chosen this course.”<sup>175</sup> Johnson responded that he was sorry that Nigerians felt that way, stating that he had always kept lines of communication open for Nigeria and Biafra. Johnson further explained that his support for humanitarian aid in Biafra was based on his conviction as a Christian to take

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<sup>172</sup> Urhobo, *Relief Operation*, 31.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>174</sup> “Church Unit Cold to Biafra Relief: World Council Says Flights Only Prolong Civil War,” *New York Times*, December 6, 1969, 49.

<sup>175</sup> McCullum, “Biafra,” *The United Church Observer*, February 15, 1970.

risks in the name of “suffering humanity,” which unfortunately, had been interpreted by the Nigerian government as an act of hostility.<sup>176</sup>

While Arikpo’s criticism reflects the view held by many Nigerians on the humanitarian role of the church, Johnson’s remark is also typical of the response of church groups. The message of church leaders like E. H. Johnson was that the outcome of the war did not matter to them. What was paramount was the Christian command: “feed the hungry.” Although Johnson had been involved in feeding both Nigerians and Biafrans in Nigerian-held territories, his public statements evidently showed that his sympathy had swung to the Biafran side. Speaking at a press interview in Toronto in 1969, he stated: “Look, up until pretty recently, I was a one-Nigeria man... The Biafrans are fighting a peoples’ war. After what they’ve been through, they will fight to death, tree to tree, if necessary. The federal are fighting a leaders’ war for some political concept.”<sup>177</sup> Although the humanitarian aid in Biafra was not politically oriented, many foreign missionaries who were present during the war generally sympathized with the Biafran struggle for independence. Ron McGraw, who was a World Council of Churches relief representative, noted that as individuals, many of the missionaries did give some kind of political support in the sense that they said what they felt, having witnessed the massacres of Biafrans since 1966.<sup>178</sup>

Many observers were unaware of the internal tension over relief aid within the Protestant Church. It was difficult for those outside the narrow circle of church leaders to

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

<sup>177</sup> Betty Lee, “One Missionary’s Fight to Feed Biafra,” File PCCA 5005-14-1.

<sup>178</sup> Ron McGraw, Oral Interview, February 21, 2012.

get a full picture of the situation due to the limited and conflicting reports from the press.<sup>179</sup> Many survivors of the war in Biafra still live with the impression that the WCC, like Caritas, continued their humanitarian activities until the end of the war.<sup>180</sup> Protestant churches unofficially operated under the name, WCC as well as Christian Council of Biafra (CCB).<sup>181</sup> WCC and CCB were interchangeably used to describe the world protestant church body in Biafra. As earlier noted, the WCC initially supported humanitarian action in Biafra but later withdrew its official support in order to avoid being entangled in the political controversies surrounding the role humanitarian action in the conflict.

Another important aspect of the relief debate was the international publicity that became associated with it. The work of the JCA's relief attracted significant international publicity largely arising from a concerted and well-coordinated publicity campaign by the organization. The statement of accounts of Canarelief (Canadian relief agency for Biafra) covering August to December 1968 shows that the organization spent a total of \$11,259 on publicity.<sup>182</sup> This was outside the JCA's central publicity in Sao Tome. Other church relief agencies from other countries also committed funds to publicizing their humanitarian activities in their home countries in order to create more awareness about

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<sup>179</sup> Nigeria-Biafra: Brief Reports on Various Aspects of the Situation, May 12, 1969, File PCCA 5005-8-1.

<sup>180</sup> S. K. Okpi, Oral Interview, July 13, 2011.

<sup>181</sup> Alex Zeidman, "For Six Eventful Months, I helped to Feed Biafrans," *Presbyterian Record*, June 1969.

<sup>182</sup> Nigeria/Biafra Relief Fund of Canada: Statement of Receipts and Disbursements, August 1 to December 31, 1968 by Thorne, Gunn, Helliwell and Christenson Chartered Accountants, March 17, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-7-10.



the conflict and bring in more donations for the Biafra project. In this regard, church organizations contributed significantly in bringing the plight of Biafra to the attention of the world. As Peter Worthington, a *Telegram* correspondent noted, the church continued to excite the conscience of Europe and North America and to encourage public opinion to prod governments and politicians.<sup>183</sup> Others worried about the impact of church propaganda in tilting international public opinion against Nigeria. The Nigerian leader, General Gowon, who was particularly disturbed about the global media publicity, described it as political interference in Nigeria's internal affairs.<sup>184</sup>

Commenting on the impact of church propaganda in the war, *The Monday Times* called for the tightening of Nigeria's internal security and close monitoring of the activities of "professional humanitarian organizations like ICRC, Caritas, and visitors who enter Nigeria pretending to be friends only to return to their countries and give valuable information about our strength to Ojukwu's agents in Europe."<sup>185</sup> There was also concern that the expertise of the church groups in "international propaganda" was being deployed more explicitly in support of Biafra. Some missionaries were accused of playing supportive roles in the Biafran "rebellion" by supporting its propaganda machinery. Father Kevin Doheny, a priest of the Holy Ghost Catholic Order, allegedly served as

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<sup>183</sup> Peter Worthington, "Without the Church, Biafra Would Have Starved," *Telegram*, February 7, 1979.

<sup>184</sup> Nigeria: Peace Talks and Relief Assistance, July 19, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-1-5.

<sup>185</sup> Nigeria Press Roundup December 29 and 30 1968, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria, *Telegram*.

Ojukwu's intelligence director.<sup>186</sup> The Nigerian government also believed that Doheny was responsible for all radio communications in Biafra and had unlimited access to the Biafran leader.

Apart from the allegation of giving political support to Biafra, the Nigerian government also accused the JCA of providing foreign exchange to the Biafran government.<sup>187</sup> The Nigerian government alleged that millions of dollars provided by churches in West Germany, Nordic countries and the Red Cross had been exchanged by the ICRC for “worthless” Biafran currency to buy relief supplies on local markets in Biafra.<sup>188</sup> According to the Nigerian government, the Biafran government used the foreign exchange for arms purchases including chemicals for manufacturing mines and explosives.<sup>189</sup> The ICRC spokesperson in Lagos denied providing money for such local purchases, adding that their spending on relief supplies was done outside Biafra.<sup>190</sup> In fact, the Biafran currency was the only legal tender in Biafra and had little value.<sup>191</sup> It was evident that the JCA personnel exchanged foreign exchange for the local currency with which they bought local foods to supplement the supplies that came in from Europe and North America.<sup>192</sup> This currency exchange was a necessary part of the JCA's relief

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<sup>186</sup> Ferguson-Doheny Discussion, August 27, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>187</sup> Press Round-up, September 25, 1968, Department of State, POL 27 Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> “The Fate of Umuahia,” *West Africa*, September 28, 1968, 1153.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Tom Burns, “Nigerian Journey,” *The Tablet of London*, 222, nos 6707 and 6708, December 7 and 14, 1968, 3.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

operations in Biafra. What the Biafran government did with the foreign currency it received in the course of the normal transactions with the JCA personnel could not reasonably have been determined by the JCA. Many observers, however, believed that the foreign currency earned by the Biafran government was used to acquire arms.<sup>193</sup> It is noteworthy however, that Biafra had other means of earning foreign exchange. Apart from donations raised through its international campaigns coordinated by Markpress, the Biafran government also generated revenue through the sale of stamps.<sup>194</sup> The Biafran postage stamp began to appear on the world philatelic markets in large quantities in September 1968. A set of five stamps depicting flowers with the additional inset “Help Biafran Children” cost as much as £1 16s, 6d in Amsterdam, one of the largest philatelic centers in Europe.<sup>195</sup> It was estimated that the Biafran stamp generated as much as £650,000 per annum.<sup>196</sup>

It is significant to note that the role of the church as humanitarian agencies went beyond merely obeying the biblical injunction to feed the hungry. The church also had a historical attachment to the people of Biafra. Most of the missionaries who were involved in the humanitarian service had long been established in Biafra, having lived and done missionary work among the people many years before the outbreak of the war. When the war broke out, many of them simply adjusted from their mission work to the new job of “feeding the hungry.” The war became a test of the message they had preached to the

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<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Kennedy Lindsay, “Biafran Valuable Stamps,” *West Africa*, March 8, 1969, 269.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

people. As Charlotte Stuart, one of the missionaries who rendered humanitarian services in Biafra stated: “How could we abandon the people we have lived with and preached to?”<sup>197</sup> Similarly, Ann Travis, a nurse from Liverpool who was in Biafra before the war broke out said she took the risk of staying behind because she loved the people and the people needed her.<sup>198</sup>

Some commentators have argued that the church groups were most efficient in providing humanitarian service in Biafra.<sup>199</sup> The people of Biafra trusted the missionaries more than their own officials and this made the church groups particularly effective in bringing relief to millions of starving innocent children, women, and aged people.<sup>200</sup> Hugh McCullum of the *Canadian Churchman* described the role of the churches in the Nigeria-Biafra War as the Churches’ “finest hour”.<sup>201</sup> As C. Nwokolo, who coordinated the Refugee Medical Service Rehabilitation Commission put it, “there is no doubt that it was the churches’ humanitarian effort that stood between Biafra and disaster.”<sup>202</sup> It is to the credit of the churches that where governments, the United Nations, the Organization of African Unity and the International Committee of the Red Cross failed, the world

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<sup>197</sup> Charlotte Stuart, Oral Interview, October 9, 2012. Her continued attachment to the Igbo part of Biafra made her choose *Odinma* (God is good) as an inscription on her customized car number plate in Canada.

<sup>198</sup> Hugh McCullum, Nigeria/Biafra: A Special 8 Page Report, *Canadian Churchman*, February 13, 1970.

<sup>199</sup> Peter Worthington, “Without the Church, Biafra Would Have Starved,” *Telegram*, February 7, 1969.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>201</sup> McCullum, Nigeria/Biafra: A Special 8 Page Report, *Canadian Churchman*, February 13, 1970.

<sup>202</sup> C. Nwokolo, *Biafran Refugees: Problems of Disease Prevention and Medical Care* (Enugu: Biafra Rehabilitation Commission, 1969), 30.

churches under the umbrella of the Joint Church Aid successfully cut diplomatic red tape and brought food to the needy. Even though the churches did not plan for this historic humanitarian work, they demonstrated an outstanding success for an old-time missionary zeal and even modern-day relief delivery.

Unfortunately, the warring parties were deeply convinced about the rightness of their causes and wanted the churches involved in humanitarian work to make political judgments that would suit them. On the Biafran side, there was a push for church groups to do more than simply feeding the hungry. International publicity garnered by church humanitarian groups was thus linked with the broader propaganda war. Missionaries working in Biafra publicly proclaimed their neutrality but often, their actions and statements showed their sympathy for the Biafran cause. On the Nigerian side of the conflict, many felt that the church should not place religious bonds above loyalty to Nigeria's sovereignty.<sup>203</sup> Although the Nigerian government had emphasized that religion was not a major or immediate cause of the conflict, many Nigerians often stressed the JCA's role was informed by their religious interpretation of the conflict.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown that the JCA's humanitarian operation in Biafra was confronted with many challenges, including logistical difficulties, the lack of adequate personnel, and attacks by the Nigerian military forces. However, the preoccupation with national sovereignty on both sides of the conflict played the most crucial role in the

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<sup>203</sup> "The Foreign Coalition Against Nigeria," *Nigerian Opinion*, 4, nos 7-9, October 1968, 339.

humanitarian operation. The leaders of Nigeria and Biafra were unwilling to make concessions that would allow the relief agencies to switch from the nightly airlift to daylight airlift. The daylight flight would have ensured uninterrupted flow of relief supplies and minimized hazards associated with night flights. Attempts by world leaders including the Pope to bring the war leaders to agreement failed. While the Nigerian leader, General Gowon did not want anything that could in any way compromise Nigeria's sovereignty, the Biafran leader Ojukwu argued that the survival of his people was tied to Biafran independence. The clash of these two positions led to avoidable suffering and deaths while internationally donated relief supplies wasted away in warehouses in Sao Tome and Fernando Po.

This struggle to gain strategic military advantage was complicated by the fact that starvation was considered a strategic tool by the two leaders. The Nigerian government was convinced that a rigorous enforcement of the starvation policy could bring Biafra to submission sooner. The Biafran leader on the other hand felt that the face of starving children could win him sympathy and recognition from the world community. The civilian masses in Biafra were therefore caught in the middle of political and military objectives of the warring parties. This shows that the humanitarian project was deeply contested and relief operations were complicated by factors beyond the control of the humanitarian agencies.

Finally, humanitarian aid had several unintended consequences. It may not have been the intention of the church groups to provide funds for Biafra to wage its war, but the humanitarian operation seemed to have obliquely ended up doing that. Also, church

humanitarian activities under the auspices of the JCA negatively affected the public image of church groups in Nigeria. Many Nigerians saw the churches as meddling in their internal matters thereby prolonging the conflict. Even though the Pope and other church leaders tried to avoid being entangled in the politics of the war, Nigerian officials still saw the churches as complicit in Biafra secessionist war. These unexpected upshots hampered the humanitarian project. However, they do not obfuscate that the humanitarian effort was largely successful and that it laid the foundation for the emergence of many western humanitarian organizations that have continued to play important roles in humanitarian interventions.

## CHAPTER 6 CONCLUSION

This study shows that international humanitarian aid played an important role in the Nigeria-Biafra War. The involvement of global religious organizations such as the World Council of Churches (WCC) and *Caritas internationalis* opened up a new vista for understanding the concept of humanitarianism as an obligation to humanity. The strong presence of Christian missionaries in Biafra played a significant role in drawing the attention of the world to the mass suffering of civilians. Although the roots of the conflict had little or no connection with religion, external observers and the belligerents themselves often interpreted the war as a conflict between Christians and Muslims. Consequently, religion and genocide became part of the issues that shaped the massive humanitarian response from individuals, humanitarian agencies and governments. However, humanitarian organizations were motivated to provide assistance because of the compelling need to reduce mass suffering and save lives among the civilian population. For many of those involved in the relief project, the desire to provide care for people at the risk of starvation in a distant country underscored the universalistic notion that human life is sacred and should be protected.

This research contributes to the understanding of international humanitarian aid in several ways. It shows that international humanitarian aid in political conflicts can be complex and controversial, irrespective of the original intentions of the principal actors. Humanitarian aid in Biafra, though well-intentioned, generated multiple meanings among the groups involved in the conflict. While the humanitarian response aimed to provide relief for the starving Biafran population, it was interpreted by the Nigerian government



as political support for a “rebellion.” Nigerian government officials saw the action of the humanitarian organizations as an act of hostility and violation of its sovereignty. The argument of the Nigerian government was not mainly about the question of the impartiality or neutrality of the humanitarian agencies. The government’s position was that humanitarian aid provided moral and material support for the secessionist regime thereby prolonging the war.<sup>1</sup> It was on this basis that the Nigerian Head of State, General Gowon, gave the order to the Nigerian Air Force to shoot down any relief aircraft that flew without clearance from the Nigerian government.<sup>2</sup> For the people of Biafra, on the other hand, humanitarian aid was a welcome development; an assistance that had come in time of great need. It was therefore difficult to draw a line of demarcation between what constituted humanitarian aid and political support for Biafra. The interpretation of humanitarian aid depended on who was giving it and who was receiving it. Humanitarian aid thus became a contested terrain that brought the humanitarian organizations into direct conflict with the Nigerian government.

The complex interpretation of humanitarian aid in Biafra could also be seen in the response of some national governments to the Biafran famine. While the Nigerian government and its supporters believed that humanitarian aid supported the Biafran “rebellion,” other national governments had a contrary view about the aid. The German government, for instance, made the highest financial donations to support humanitarian

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<sup>1</sup> “Yakubu Gowon: Soldier Statesman,” *Daily Sketch*, October 19, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> Nigeria Summary, July 19, 1979, File Department of State, POL27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

aid in Biafra.<sup>3</sup> German aid was channeled through the German Catholic and Protestant churches. The Scandinavian countries channeled much of their relief supplies through the Nordchurchaid. Despite its policy of neutrality, the US government still made a significant contribution to the relief aid in Biafra through the ICRC.

Nonetheless, the humanitarian actions of the church organisations in Biafra were guided by theological principles and specifically, the biblical injunction to feed the hungry. Pope Paul VI observed that the moral obligation of saving the lives of people was more important than politics.<sup>4</sup> For most church groups, complicated questions about sovereignty were less important than alleviating suffering. The moral obligation of helping to alleviate the suffering of the masses was considered more important than the political obligation of maintaining cordial diplomatic relations with the Nigerian government. Thus, the actions of the humanitarian organizations were driven essentially by Christian ethics, charity and philanthropy. The urgent need to mitigate human suffering had its roots in the feeling that human life is sacred regardless of race or national origin. Emphasis on the sanctity of human life and the need to care were paramount, and these apparently reflected the legacy of the core values of 19th century Christian missionaries, who saw Christianity as a humanitarian mission.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> West German Public Opinion on Nigerian Civil War, August 6, 1969, File Department of State, POL 27, Biafra-Nigeria, Telegram.

<sup>4</sup> Catholic Relief Services: Special Issue: Nigeria/Biafra, Summer Edition 1968, File NAE, MSP/X6.

<sup>5</sup> Craig Calhoun, “The Imperative to Reduce Suffering: Charity, Progress, and Emergencies in the Field of Humanitarian Action,” in Michael Barnett and Thomas G. Weiss eds., *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2008), 78-79.

Another important finding of this study is that in the Biafran context, humanitarian aid was given without creating long-term dependency of the recipients on donor agencies. This finding challenges the assumption that recipients of humanitarian aid always come to depend on external assistance and thus lose the capacity to generate internal support to help alleviate their suffering.<sup>6</sup> The capitulation of Biafra and the abrupt suspension of relief flights to Biafra did not create a situation of continued dependence on the external relief supply in Biafra. The JCA averted this dependency because it encouraged local agricultural production to supplement the goods imported by the humanitarian organizations.

The JCA recognized that Biafrans had their own capacities and could sustain themselves through local agricultural production. JCA officials built on this existing capacity by teaching and providing local farmers with seeds to boost local agricultural production. Since Biafra's prewar capacity for self-sufficiency was not destroyed by total dependence on what was imported by the humanitarian organizations, it was easy for the people to adjust to the temporary hardship created by the sudden withdrawal of the humanitarian agencies. This innovation in humanitarian aid strategy can be described as "humanitarian aid with local content."<sup>7</sup> It can also be argued that this concept of "humanitarian aid with local content" contributed to the successful transition and

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<sup>6</sup> Mary B. Anderson, "You Save My Life Today, But for What Tomorrow?" in Jonathan Moore, ed. *Hard Choices: Moral Dilemmas in Humanitarian Intervention* (Lanham, MD: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 1998) 137.

<sup>7</sup> I am not aware of any previous usage of that description in the literature on humanitarian studies. I also find the JCA's strategy of involving the local population in humanitarian action as an innovation that can help forestall the problem long-term dependency in humanitarian interventions.

integration of Biafrans in the postwar Nigeria. Recognizing the capacities of the aid recipients by humanitarian aid givers is an important strategy that can help present-day humanitarians overcome the challenges of long-term dependency, especially in conflict zones.

Although the collapse of Biafra on January 12, 1970 brought the JCA's existence to an end, its role in Biafra has inspired the formation of similar humanitarian organizations. For instance, the idea that inspired the JCA was reborn in 1990 with the formation of Action by Churches Together (ACT).<sup>8</sup> ACT is a global alliance of churches and other related agencies with headquarters in Geneva. Like the JCA, ACT engages in life-saving missions in different parts of the world. Similar groups have emerged elsewhere. The Church Relief and Development Association (CRDA) in Ethiopia was founded by Fr Kevin Doheny (a Catholic priest in Biafra),<sup>9</sup> and "African Concern" now known as Concern Worldwide grew out of the humanitarian crisis in Biafra. African Concern was formed on March 19, 1968, following an appeal for relief to Biafra called "Send One Ship" (SOS).<sup>10</sup> In addition, some of the former volunteers in Biafra went on to establish humanitarian agencies such as the International Refugee Trust in the UK and the Refugee Trust in Ireland.<sup>11</sup> The Refugee Trust has rendered humanitarian services in countries such as Bosnia, Turkey, Rwanda, Kenya, Sierra Leone and Guinea. Doctors Without Borders/*Medicins Sans Frontieres* (MSF), a humanitarian organization founded

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<sup>8</sup> Hugh McCullum, "Remembering the Nightmare of Biafra," *Presbyterian Record*, 2004, 31.

<sup>9</sup> Byrne, *Airlift to Biafra*, 195.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

by French doctors and journalists in the aftermath of the Nigeria-Biafra War in 1971 has gained global prominence in its effort to provide medical aid to people facing endemic diseases regardless of race, religion or political affiliation. Based on these developments in humanitarian aid, one can conclude that the humanitarian action in Biafra created the springboard for the rise of other humanitarian organizations that have helped to bring humanitarian support to the needy in different parts of the world in peace or war time.

Apart from these legacies, the humanitarian project in Biafra had other unintended consequences, such as creating revenue for the Biafran government. The Nigerian authorities believed that the foreign exchange that accrued to the Biafran government through local purchases by the humanitarians groups helped Biafra to acquire arms and munitions, thereby sustaining the independence struggle. This claim is open to debate. The activities of church humanitarian groups also had a negative impact on the public image of the Christian Church in Nigeria. Anti-Vatican sentiments ran deep within the Nigerian media. In some popular magazines for instance, the Pope was referred to as “Colonel Pope Paul.”<sup>12</sup> There were also unfounded allegations that the Catholic charity organization, *Caritas Internationalis*, engaged in a gun-running activity from the island of Sao Tome to Biafra, and that it hired mercenary pilots in the name of humanitarianism.<sup>13</sup> In a meeting with the relief agencies on July 19, 1968, General Gowon accused Caritas of paying for a space for relief supplies in the same aircraft that illegally carried arms and

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<sup>12</sup> Tom Burns, “Nigerian Journey,” *The Tablet of London*, 222, nos 6707 and 6708, December 7 and 14, 1968, 4.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

ammunition to the “rebels.”<sup>14</sup> Gowon also feared the widespread publicity that Caritas and Oxfam humanitarian activities received globally because of the attention and sympathy that it brought to the Biafran cause.<sup>15</sup> Resentment towards the missionaries continued after the war, as the Nigerian government continued to detain and deport missionaries who were suspected to have performed humanitarian work in Biafra.

Another unintended consequence of the Churches’ humanitarian activities was that the Presbyterian Church lost its traditional influence in the Efik-Ibibio area of Biafra before the war ended. Many missionaries were forced to abandon their missions when the Efik-Ibibio area was occupied by the Nigerian forces.<sup>16</sup> Some of the missionaries served in refugee camps in the Biafran-held area while others worked at the inter-confessional Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Umuahia. As a result, the Efik-Ibibio people appeared to have been neglected in the humanitarian aid. Although members of the Presbyterian Church had divergent opinions about the war, many Nigerian officials believed that the Presbyterian Church Mission Board supported Biafra. This perception by Nigerian leaders led to distrust of the church by its members who supported the Nigerian cause. Consequently, the Nigerian government showed hostility towards the church for its perceived role in the conflict. After it gained control of the Efik-Ibibio area, the government took over the educational and medical institutions formerly run by the

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<sup>14</sup> Nigeria: Peace Talks and Relief Assistance, July 19, 1968, File PCCA, 1973-5005-1-5.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Michael I. Draper, *Shadows: Airlift and Airwar in Biafra and Nigeria, 1967-1970* (England: Hikoki Publications Ltd, 1999), 113.

missionaries.<sup>17</sup> John Reoch, a prominent missionary under the Presbyterian Church, thought that the actions of the Nigerian government reflected an anti-foreign missionary sentiment rather than “an anti-Christian sentiment.”<sup>18</sup> Despite the Nigerian government anti-missionary attitude, the church leaders still insisted that the church had a special role to play in bringing “healing and reconciliatory ministry of Jesus Christ” to both sides of the conflict.<sup>19</sup>

To address concerns about missionary support for Biafra, the Nigerian government came up with a policy that any foreign missionary who wished to stay in the Efik-Ibibio area (South East State, by the Nigerian government state creation) had to take an oath of allegiance to the Nigerian government and the Southeast State government.<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, only Presbyterian ministers were required to meet this condition for them to return to the “liberated” areas under the Nigerian government control.<sup>21</sup> In contrast, Catholic priests operated freely. Bishop Finn of the Catholic Church observed that the Presbyterian Church was being made to bear the brunt of the publicity campaign carried out collectively by church groups.<sup>22</sup> To most observers, the singling out of the

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<sup>17</sup> Report to Overseas Policy Committee: Re: Future Participation in Nigeria by E. F. Roberts, R. T. Hall and M.R. Ross, April 13, 1969, File PCCA 1973-5005-5-4.

<sup>18</sup> A View of the Nigeria-Biafra Situation As It Affects Our Future Overseas Mission Program-Requested by the Overseas Executive by John A. Reoch, March 18, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-1-5.

<sup>19</sup> Nigeria-Biafra: A Brief Report on Various Aspects of the Situation, May 12, 1969, File PCCA, 1973-5005-1-5.

<sup>20</sup> Report to Overseas Policy Committee: Re: Future Participation in Nigeria by E. F. Roberts, R. T. Hall and M.R. Ross, April 13, 1969, File PCCA 1973-5005-5-4.

<sup>21</sup> Memorandum on the Visit of the Roman Catholic Bishops in Nigeria to Rome by J. E. Smallwood, December 21, 1968, File NAUK, 65/305.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

Presbyterian Church by the Nigerian government was surprising considering that the Catholic Church had been roundly criticized for playing what one Nigerian newspaper described as a “despicable role” aimed at breaking up Nigeria.<sup>23</sup> Some Nigerian commentators had even suggested treating the Vatican as an enemy of Nigeria.<sup>24</sup> The discriminatory attitude towards the Presbyterian Church may be connected with the role of Okoi Arikpo, who was a Presbyter from the Efik-Ibibio region and Nigeria’s Foreign Affairs Commissioner. Arikpo was deeply critical of the role of the Presbyterian Church leaders in the conflict. The church leadership, however, understood the politics behind the Nigerian government’s hostility and recommended that anybody assigned to serve in the reestablishment of missionary work in the Efik-ibibio area must be someone who had not made any public utterance in favor of Biafra.<sup>25</sup> For the church, the immediate priority was to re-establish confidence with the Efik-Ibibio people and the Nigerian government.<sup>26</sup> These unintended consequences reflect more of the “hazards” associated with humanitarianism in conflicts rather than the intrinsically problematic nature of humanitarian activity.

The humanitarian intervention in Biafra might have had its downsides, yet its positive impact outweighed what might be considered its negative consequences. It is possible that the international humanitarian aid might have contributed to the

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<sup>23</sup> “The Roman Catholic Church and the Nigerian Crisis,” *Morning Post*, December 2, 1968.

<sup>24</sup> “Our Enemies,” *Observer*, November 30, 1968.

<sup>25</sup> Report to Overseas Policy Committee: Re: Future Participation in Nigeria by E. F. Roberts, R. T. Hall and M.R. Ross, April 13, 1969, File PCCA 1973-5005-5-4.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*



prolongation of the Nigeria-Biafra War. However, many lives were saved as a result of the intervention. In this regard, the humanitarian aid in Biafra was largely a success story that not only saved lives, but also broke traditional barriers that existed between different religious groups. For the first time in the history of modern humanitarian intervention, the Catholic and Protestant churches from different parts of the world joined efforts in the spirit of ecumenism to save lives outside their national borders. The humanitarian operation in Biafra also marked a historical advance in Jewish-Christian co-operation. The Biafran humanitarian crisis can therefore be said to have awakened the conscience of the global community and united different religious groups for the purpose saving human lives.

The key arguments of this dissertation have been outlined in the concluding sections of the five preceding chapters. A review of related literature on the Nigeria-Biafra War shows that the international humanitarian aid in the conflict has not been adequately represented in the war literature. The international humanitarian aid has been treated as a footnote in the broader history of the conflict. Yet, it was the humanitarian aid that prompted and shaped the internationalization of the war. Again, this study links the conflict with the colonial policy and post-colonial nation- building challenges. It notes the massacres of the people of Eastern Nigeria (later Biafra) as a major contributory factor in the secession. The 1966 massacres formed part of the war humanitarian debate in the international community. Although there was no noticeable humanitarian action after the massacres, the humanitarian organizations and commentators often made reference to the

1966 massacre of Eastern Nigerians to justify the Biafran secession and the humanitarian aid.<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, the dissertation explores the efforts of the missionaries, the Biafran government, the Jewish community and common citizens to facilitate humanitarian aid in Biafra. It argues that the missionaries' private correspondences, appeals and media publicity about the Biafran famine set in motion the drive for humanitarian aid. Their horrifying reports of mass starvation and images of children suffering from kwashiorkor in Biafra generated huge concerns and public debates in Europe and North America. The Biafran crisis was particularly interesting in a century when the church seemed to have been inactive on global issues. The Secretary General of the World Council of Churches, Eugene Carson Blake, in a meeting in Uppsala in July 1968, alluded to this when he stated "The churches are facing the question: What does the world demand of the church?"<sup>28</sup> Rhetorical, as it sounded, Bishop Harris of Liverpool had an answer. Preaching in Liverpool Cathedral, Bishop Harris called on the church to stand up to its responsibility by reaching out to the distressed, the lonely and underprivileged in Biafra and other parts of the world.<sup>29</sup> He stated that the church that Christ founded was moving forward and must move forward if it was to be true to Christ.<sup>30</sup> Many missionaries shared this view that the church must act save the millions of civilians who were threatened with starvation and malnutrition in Biafra.

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<sup>27</sup> "One Missionary's Fight to Feed Biafra," by Betty Lee, File PCCA 1973-5005-14-1.

<sup>28</sup> "Politics and Race cut Across WCC," *Catholic Herald*, July 19, 1968, 2.

<sup>29</sup> "The Church Cannot Stand Still, Says Bishop Harris," *Catholic Herald*, February 28, 1969, 2.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

In addition to the missionaries' campaign for aid, the Biafran government mobilized a professional publicity agency to draw the attention of the world community to the plight of its citizens. Markpress engaged with the international community and effectively aroused its conscience to the devastation caused by starvation in Biafra. Akanu Ibiam who was Ojukwu's political adviser also used his position as World Council of Churches Vice President to appeal to church groups in Europe and North America for humanitarian aid. The Jewish community in the US and Canada joined in the effort to bring relief to starving population. The Jews saw a similarity in the suffering of Biafrans and those of the Jews during the Second World War. In addition, the common citizens who led demonstrations across Europe and North America made a significant contribution to the humanitarian drive. These various groups responded to the Biafran famine either because they were convinced it was a religious war between Muslims and Christians or because they felt the Nigerian government was waging a genocidal war against Biafra by starvation. Their efforts contributed to the formation of the Joint Church Aid.

This study shows that the JCA, as a humanitarian organization, played a uniquely momentous role in the global history of humanitarian aid. The humanitarian aid came at a time when the Nigerian government-imposed blockade had effectively produced widespread famine and mass deaths in Biafra. The JCA's humanitarian aid was multifaceted. It included the provision of protein-rich food, medical services, clothing and housing. The JCA's humanitarian effort was historic because it marked the first time the Catholic and Protestant Churches joined efforts to carry out such a huge humanitarian

operation regardless of their theological differences. The study shows that the JCA's humanitarian effort in Biafra was driven mainly by the desire to alleviate the suffering of the masses rather any political or economic motives as some critics alleged. Although the churches had sympathy for Biafrans because of historic religious connections, it was cautious not to get directly entangled with the politics of the war.

Nevertheless, the JCA was confronted with many challenges in the course providing relief for the war-stricken civilians. Despite its relative success, the church groups encountered a number of obstacles ranging from lack of personnel and logistical problems to attacks from the Nigerian military. One of the most challenging of these obstacles was the counter-action of the Nigerian military. Another obstacle, which was most frustrating in the relief effort was, the belligerents' claim to sovereignty. The volume of relief supplies delivered largely depended on the activities of the Nigerian military and the issue of sovereignty. An overall assessment of the JCA, however, shows that its intervention helped to save lives and alleviate human suffering in Biafra. Although the church groups were criticised for getting involved in a political conflict, leaders of the church organisations believed they had a moral obligation to intervene and not to stand by and watch the victims of war suffer in the name of politics. The posture of the church groups as humanitarian organizations had a theological underpinning in the biblical injunction to feed the hungry and care for the needy.

One significant finding of this study is that the missionary zeal that influenced the expansion of Christianity in Nigeria in the colonial era also played out in war-time humanitarian intervention. While recognizing the sentiment of collective humanity as

factor that drove the extensive humanitarian action in Biafra, it is also evident that the church groups, especially the Catholic and Presbyterian churches had had a strong connection with the people of Biafra following the 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian missionary work. This earlier connection of foreign missionaries with the people of Biafra helped to create global awareness about the plight of the civilian population.

Finally, this research contributes to the scholarship on the internationalization of armed conflicts in post-colonial Africa. It advances our understanding of local perceptions of international engagement in civil conflicts and how such perceptions shape local reactions and the outcome of conflicts. This study also provides a useful model to scholars and providers of humanitarian aid in Africa and other developing countries where conflicts and natural disasters call for such interventions. The successful delivery of humanitarian aid in Biafra without creating long-term dependency offers a model of international relief intervention that other humanitarian organizations can learn from.

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