

**‘HUMANITARIANS, NOT MEDDLERS’:  
THE RED CROSS IN THE NIGERIA-BIAFRA WAR,  
1967-1970**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Events of the Nigeria-Biafra War brought a number of international relief missions on the frontline of the war. Their intervention in the war was not without some problems. It raised some serious suspicions in both the Nigerian and Biafra camps. These relief missions have been often adjudged as political mercenaries in a cloak of humanitarians. The common claim is that they meddled into the affairs and politics of the war, thus, aided its prolongation. More worrisome but engaging is this notion has continued to survive in many accounts of the war. Obviously, situation as this calls for a re-examination. This paper, therefore, re-examines the role of the Red Cross (International Committee of Red Cross, ICRC) as one of the critical relief missions in the war. Focusing on the motive(s), environment, activities and challenges of the ICRC in the war, the paper finds out that it did so much to uphold its obligation to be neutral, as it was not engaged in any covert activities involving arms smuggling, sharing military intelligence, acting mercenary soldier, or willful hoarding of relief material to give undue advantage to one of the two sides in the conflict. Only that the ICRC intervention and the manner it was conducted were mostly misunderstood due largely to the propaganda and paranoia of some third party entering the war. The paper, thus, argues that the role played by the Red Cross in the war did not in any way suggest some form of political meddling and, in that regard, does not qualify to be considered so. Rather, the Geneva based organisation showed a deep sense of committed humanitarianism whose selfless undertaking saved millions of*



*lives in the war. This paper is historical; hence, it adopts a qualitative method of analysis. Useful pieces of information were obtained from interviews, important relevant documents, reports, and array of secondary sources.*

**Key words:** Nigeria-Biafra War, The Red Cross, Relief, Humanitarian, Neutrality.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The secession of the Eastern Region from Nigeria and its declaration of independent Republic of Biafra amidst intense political tension directly brought about the Nigeria-Biafra War in 1967. At the wake of the war were the expectation that victory would be quick in few weeks on the Nigerian side and a belief of invincibility on the part of Biafra but, the war defied both the expectation and the belief, and dragged on for almost two years and about seven months. A lot of issues came with the war, the most challenging being the deplorable humanitarian condition that arose therewith. Throughout the war wanton starvation and suffering amongst the civilian population were most grave and generated serious international concern. The news and images of suffering and dying children and women particularly on the Biafra side circulated abroad, and attracted not only pity and condemnation but, also, action.<sup>1</sup> Cross sections of individuals, groups, organisations and governments made spirited efforts in contributing relief assistance to mitigate or possibly avert the implosion of an impending humanitarian disaster.

However, the role(s) played by the international humanitarian actors have raised some serious controversy. It mostly impinges on the way and manner different accounts of the war are rendered since it (the war) ended. A number of scholarships have questioned the ‘neutrality’ of international relief industry in the war. John Stremlau’s *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970*, David W. Myrick’s ground breaking thesis “Biafra Still Matters: Contested Humanitarian Airlift and American Foreign Policy”, Jacinta Nwaka’s



contribution “When Neutrality Loses Its Value: the Caritas Airlift to Biafra 1968-1970”, and F. C. Onuegbu and H. I. Hanson’s “The Role of U.S and Her Multinational Private Companies in the Nigeria-Biafra War: Beyond the Threshold of Neutrality”, all maintain that the foreign relief efforts in the war were compromised, and left the neutrality dogma dead.<sup>2</sup> John Okpoko in his *The Biafran Nightmare* contends the activities of the relief agencies in the civil war constituted a political intervention.<sup>3</sup> For Michael Aaronson’s contribution “The Nigerian Civil War and Humanitarian Intervention” and Olusegun Obasanjo’s *My Command: an Account of the Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970*, the activities of the relief agencies prolonged the war into a protracted one.<sup>4</sup> However, it is only a few works like Tony Byrne’s *Airlift to Biafra: Breaching the Blockade*; Michael I. Draper’s *Airlift and Air war in Biafra and Nigeria 1967-1970*; and Al J. Venter’s *Biafra’s War 1967-1970: A Tribal Conflict in Nigeria that Left a Million Dead* that made efforts to show some selfless and morally dictated role(s) played by the international relief organisations in the Nigeria-Biafra War, though there are still a number of unaddressed issues.<sup>5</sup> The relief agencies are often described as political interventionists who meddled into the affairs of the war. But the question remains: in as much as this claim may be substantiated when it comes to the relief assistance from foreign states/governments and international agencies controlled by states where there are diverging and converging interests, can it (such claims) be substantially true of relief conducted by international civil and religious groups with no vested states’ interests? If at all there were instances of meddlesomeness amongst the non state and religious agencies said to have been involved in the humanitarian relief assistance in the war, were such tendencies exhibited across board, or were there exceptions? Considering these two pressing questions, this paper sets out to re-examine the role of International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) in the Nigeria-Biafra War.

The paper is divided into six parts. The first part is introduction. The second section deals with the deplorable



humanitarian situation that caught the attention and action of international relief organisations. This is followed by an analysis of the initial experience of ICRC in the war – working under the Joint Nigeria Relief Operation. The fourth part discusses the Red Cross International in the airlift for Biafra relief operation. The penultimate section looks at the challenges that confronted the Red Cross in the relief operation which largely shaped its attitude to the war and the kind of decisions it took therein. The last part is the conclusion. The argument tends to suggest that the ICRC was primarily guided in the actions and decisions it took in the course of its relief operation in the Nigerian conflict by a moral obligation to save the deplorable humanitarian condition, and not by political, ethnic, or religious bias.

### **Inside Biafra: the Cause for International Relief Assistance**

The Nigeria-Biafra War was preceded by grave humanitarian crisis. Within the first few months of the war, want on starvation and general economic emasculation inside Biafra had caused far more thousands of deaths than the Nigerian guns. The increasing influx of refugees and scores of Easterners violently displaced from other parts of Nigeria particularly from the North into the Eastern enclave combined to produce a horrifying humanitarian tragedy therein. Before the war actually broke out, the economic and humanitarian situations in the Eastern Nigeria were already in some serious danger. Between May 1966 and January 1967, about one million Igbo refugees, materially and psychologically dispossessed, were caused to flee from the North and some parts of the West to the East. Already more than 12 million inhabitants in the East were gripped with fear and search for safety in the face of anti-Igbo pogrom.<sup>6</sup> The situation that ensued spelt torrents of hardships and social dislocations for the Easterners on one hand, and severe financial and security strain for the Eastern Regional Government on the other hand. Anxiety and hunger stared on the faces of Igbo returnees and refugees; hence, and became a huge burden for their kits and kin who absorbed them. The point is that



before the war actually began the Biafra enclave had started to experience serious humanitarian crises.

At the wake of the Nigeria-Biafra War, the Nigerian military forces mounted serious 'blockade' against Biafra. Every important entry point into Biafra through the sea, air, and land corridors were blocked and policed by the Nigerian forces. Biafra was roughly square in its geographical location. Whereas the bulk of the population were the Igbo in the central plateau region, the minorities in the eastern and southern areas the country grew most of its food. The entire area was more or less self-supporting in food production. It was able to provide its carbohydrates, palm oil and fruits but depended on the cattle-breeding Northern Nigeria and the Scandinavian countries for its import of meat and dried stockfish (*okporoko*) respectively. Though there were goats and chickens inside the country, they were not enough to supply the volume of the protein necessary to keep over thirteen million people in Biafra in good health.<sup>7</sup> The war caused a severe food crisis and general economic dislocation in Biafra. The Nigerian military blockade cut Biafra off from supply of imported protein food and other essentials. Economic flows into Biafra from far and contiguous countries and regions were cut off. The blockade, thus, heightened the food crisis in Biafra resulting to mass starvation – a critical humanitarian disaster.

Incidences of malnutrition related diseases like anemia, pellagra and the scourge of kwashiorkor were common, resulting in a number of civilian casualties, majority being children and women. The Biafra authorities quickly tried to beat the problem by encouraging intensive poultry farms to boost protein productions but the loss of minority territories in the Cross River Valley and Uyo province(major food production centre) to the Nigerian forces and the concomitant influx of refugees from there into the central Igbo areas made such Biafra emergency farm initiative look like a child's play.<sup>8</sup> By the beginning of February 1968, the number of refugees increased from about one million to the range of two and a half million, and more than 268,000 civilians at an average rate of about 2,100 per day have died not only from malnutrition and



related diseases but, also, as a result of regular Nigerian air raids. About one quarter of the territory of the old Eastern Region was compelled to cater for 50-60 per cent of its original population.<sup>9</sup> The fact is that the deteriorating humanitarian condition in Biafra was no longer something the outside world could play indifference to; it was acute and, thus, called for a proactive intervention of the international community.

It was clear what really turned on the world on the question of Nigeria-Biafra War was the mass starvation and sufferings of civilian population in Biafra. After the first quarter of 1968, images of malnourished, disease-stricken and dying children and women in the war swiftly took a significant attention in the Western media. Awareness was raised amongst the public in America and Europe, and different humanitarian groups were formed abroad by a number of individuals so concerned and sympathetic to the civilian cause in Biafra. Although the Nigerian Military Government tried so hard to downplay the horrifying civilian tragedy in Biafra by reducing it to 'unnecessary Biafra propaganda', expert reports from independent sources and representatives of notable humanitarian organisations with annexes in both Biafra and Nigeria showed that the problem was real and grave. Several fact-finding missions were commissioned by concerned foreign governments and international institutions, and most of their reports were unambiguously a confirmation. But, before these findings took place at official levels to determine the degree and manner of humanitarian involvement for foreign governments (USA, Britain, Germany, France, Switzerland, Canada, Norway, and Sweden) and a number of United Nations agencies - both ancillary and affiliated - (UNICEF, UNHCR, WHO, and FAO), some international relief organisations had actually begun humanitarian work in the war-torn Biafra. One of those mandates was the Red Cross. In other words, the Red Cross is one of the important international relief missions in the Nigeria-Biafra War. Having explained 'what' morally contused its intervention in the war, the focus is now shifted to 'how' it conducted its operations/activities in the course of that war?



### **The Red Cross in the Joint Nigerian Relief Operation**

The Red Cross is a Swiss organisation founded in 1863 with international humanitarian and charity objectives and character. It is a private non profit making corporation registered under Swiss law to render charity and relief to mankind threatened by war and other forms of acute conflict. With the drawing up of the Vienna Conventions in 1949, the Red Cross was elected to ensure the principles of the conventions and their additional protocols are preserved in conflict situations around the world.<sup>10</sup> Though there have since been Red Cross Societies in a number of countries, they all took from the Geneva based Red Cross (International Committee of Red Cross, ICRC), and are affiliated to it. The Nigeria-Biafra War presented one of the crucial tests for the Red Cross in its humanitarian undertaking and practice. It is argued that since the Berlin Airlift in 1948, the ICRC has not undertaken such a large scale humanitarian mission until the event of the Nigerian conflict.<sup>11</sup> That is to say the Red Cross engagement in Biafra was severe and very challenging.

In the wake of the war appeals were made to the International Committee of Red Cross in Geneva to initiate some humanitarian effort. But, the fact remained the organisation was faced with a great difficulty in carrying out a humanitarian mission in such sharp politically divided conflict blurred with a lot of propoganda. Being organisation with a duty to be politically neutral in its moral responsibility to protect and care for the civilian welfare and rights in a conflict, it had to seek for the consent of both the Nigerian and Biafra Governments. Though agreement was later obtained from both sides, it was not unconditional. The Nigerian Government disapproved the idea of ICRC making direct airlift of relief into Biafra but, rather, suggested the organisation entrusts the responsibility to administer such relief assistance on the Nigerian Government or, in the least, on the Nigerian Red Cross Society (NRC) supervised by the Nigerian military. John Okpoko rightly pointed out that there was considerable pressure from the Federal Military Government on the NRC not to launch its own programmes but



rather to support the FMG's Army Medical Corps programme.<sup>12</sup> The ICRC felt its autonomy from government would be compromised and, feared the entire operation may be subordinated to achieve the interests of the Nigerian forces in the war; hence, it was not prepared to accept the Nigerian terms.

As the civilian crisis continued to degenerate alarmingly, coupled with an increased call on international humanitarian organisations to safe protocols and swiftly move into action, the Geneva based Red Cross had to compromise its initial stand on the Nigerian government conditions. It had to settle for a joint relief operation with the Nigerian Red Cross Society. Kevin O'Sullivan notes that the first consignment of the ICRC relief supplies arrived Biafra in November 1967, and five months later the organisation became the key coordinator of relief effort in federal-held territories.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the ICRC was the lead agency in the relief operation – the Joint Nigerian Relief Action; and the authority was exercised by the Headquarters in Geneva through its Head Mission in Lagos. Lagos became the operational centre from where shipped consignment of relief were unloaded and transported to the federal (Nigeria) controlled or occupied territories for further distribution to the starving civilian population in Biafra. The process was so cumbersome and expensive. John Okpoko further observes that:

*There were a few land routes open to the East and they were limited in capacity. The shortest from Lagos to the East involved using Lokoja ferry across the Niger River (a maximum of three trips day carrying not more than 14 cars or six trucks); the alternate route involved driving further north crossing the bridge at Jebba, then back cross the Benue River at Makurdi. The number of vehicles was small and most of the trucks had no maintenance. Besides, it was extremely difficult to rent civilian trucks for movement of foodstuffs to areas near to the eastern region because of high risk and incidence of military*





*commandeering of vehicles. It often took weeks for a truck to go from Lagos to Enugu.*<sup>14</sup>

The point is that the Joint Nigerian Relief Action for Biafra under the auspices of the Red Cross was less effective and grossly inadequate; it could only guarantee small quantity of relief comparable to mass civilian starvation that was going on. Between November 1967 and May 1968, the ICRC total relief to Biafra was only in the range of 4000 to 5000 tons.<sup>15</sup>

This slow pace of response by the Red Cross in the face of mass starvation was largely interpreted by the Biafra authorities as a calculated design to terribly undo the Biafran population. The organisation was accused of aiding the Nigerian side to undermine Biafra instead of confronting the grave humanitarian problem with the moral strength it required. This perception was given more impetus the deafening silence of the ICRC over several cases of atrocities committed by the federal forces in Biafra; yet, such inhumanities perpetrated by the Nigerian forces against Biafra civilian population clearly violated the principles of Geneva Conventions and its additional protocols which the Red Cross was meant to help protect and preserve.<sup>16</sup> The organisation could not publicly protest them or the Nigeria authorities with them. In fact, one Red Cross ex-official who saw some of those acts of inhumanity in Biafra said he was left frustrated by his agency's silent stance in that regard.<sup>17</sup> However, beyond the accusation of complicity and dereliction of a morally bound duty against the ICRC, the organization had challenges that differently contused its approach and actions.

Aside limited logistics and experience in a protracted war as that of the Nigeria-Biafra case, there were three major conditioning factors that understandably explained the Red Cross' attitude. First, it saw that to maintain silence and be allowed to continue the relief operation as little as it may appear to starving civilians and war-victims in Biafra was the best option at the moment. Confronting the Nigerian authorities would put the ICRC, already operating in a politically fragile environment, to risk



being expelled by the Nigerian Government thereby defeating the very primary aim of the operation. Secondly, the ICRC believed that even if it had chosen to protest the incidences of those humanitarian abuses, shooting and bombing of defenseless civilians, and massacre of captured Biafra soldiers by the Nigerian military it still would have not changed any thing in the main as Nigeria had a strong support of the British Government and the U.S State Department. Thirdly, the organisation reasoned that its political neutrality in the war would be at stake if it goes out of its way to pick out and challenge whatever Nigeria's blatant violations of the principles of Geneva Conventions in the prosecution of the war. After all, there was no way it could act the mouthpiece of Biafra as it would not want to be accused of selling 'genocide propaganda'.

### **The Red Cross and the 'Airlift to Biafra'**

The erratic and meager relief distribution of the Geneva based Red Cross under the umbrella of Joint Nigeria Relief Operation could do little or nothing to arrest the increasing level humanitarian disaster in Biafra. Incidences of diseases, malnutrition, general starvation and deaths had become very alarming on daily basis. Kwashiorkor and miasmas were widespread due to protein deficiency occasioned by food crisis.<sup>18</sup> Mr. Leslie H. Kirkley on a fact-finding mission in both Nigeria and Biafra frontlines told international press that if substantial large quantity of food relief did not come into Biafra in six weeks time, an estimate of 400,000 children would die of kwashiorkor, and it required about 300 tons of food per day to avert the impending danger.<sup>19</sup> The implication is that mass death was imminent; and, actually, there were rising number of civilian deaths. Conservative estimates put the number of death in the range of 3000 daily, while official Biafra sources claim between 20,000 and 30,000.<sup>20</sup> Though there were no reliable statistics on the deaths, it was clear that large numbers had died, children and women being the most hit. This was also compounded by the increasing influx of refugees from the federal-held territories into unoccupied Biafra enclave. In less than four



months about 1 million refugees had unbearably swollen to more than 3 million people.<sup>21</sup> Though the Biafran authorities with the assistance of the Red Cross and Church aid workers set up a chain of refugee camps where the homeless could at least be housed and have one meal in a day.

However, things had to change. This time around relentless publicity and the appeal for a coordinated international relief for Biafra mounted by scores of international journalists, church missionaries, staff of the Red Cross and other humanitarian aid workers in Biafra succeeded in raising the consciousness of the world public about the tragic humanitarian crisis. The Red Cross in Geneva launched its second appeal for international humanitarian assistance for Biafra. It succeeded in getting substantial donations from groups, organisations and countries across the western world which facilitated its procurement of relief aid for onward movement to Biafra but its several appeals to the Nigerian Government for airspace for 'mercy planes' were blatantly refused. As Tony Byrne notes, 'substantial relief aid were procured but, the huge challenge was how to beat the Nigerian airspace'.<sup>22</sup> Throughout the month of April, the only food relief that came into Biafra was the occasional small quantity that could fit into spare space in Hank Wharton's freelance arms-running Super Constellations flying down from Lisbon to Port-Harcourt and later Uli at nights.<sup>23</sup> The fact is that the arrangement was more of a twist of exigency and business than any kind of complicity on the part of ICRC to covertly smuggle arms into Biafra. The relief organizations involved were required to pay huge sums of money to Mr Wharton to accommodate small load of their relief materials in his aircrafts. In fact, the experience added more frustrations to the ICRC.

The Red Cross International was compelled by the urgency of the situation to start its own emergency airlift into Biafra, at least, having seen the Caritas and World Council of Churches begin night airlift operation from Sao Tome earlier. Perhaps, for reasons of nearness and neutrality, the Red Cross chose Fernando Po, a small island under the Spanish colonial control, as its



operational base. On 31<sup>st</sup> July ICRC began its independent airlift operation from Fernando Po and Mr Auguste Lindt, a diplomat par excellence, was appointed to coordinate it (the airlift operation).<sup>24</sup> The volume of food flown into Biafra by the ICRC in the first couple of months, however, was less encouraging, about 712 tons.<sup>25</sup> Though the Church groups have managed to bring in over 2500 tons their continued reliance on Mr Wharton still presented a huge difficulty as his aircraft could not accommodate large quantities of food and was always a target of shooting by the Nigerian military.<sup>26</sup> By the end of August, the number of children and women dying out of starvation and malnutrition related diseases increased from about 500 to 8,000 a day, and more than a million displaced persons in about 638 refugee camps hardly had a meal in a day.<sup>27</sup> The situation became worse again. This time around, the ICRC International Airlift West Africa with respect to Biafra had to take off. The operation was estimated to have delivered 6,520 tons of relief from Fernando Po (Santa Isabel) in Equatorial Guinea to Uli in eight fleets of aircraft between September and November 1968.<sup>28</sup> The organisation's monthly budget estimate has gone to about 15 million Swiss Francs and the Lagos operation alone was taking up to six million Swiss Francs. The ICRC showed that it distributed about 4,000 tons of relief on the Nigerian frontline through Lagos.<sup>29</sup> The implication is that the Red Cross did not only concentrate all its energy on the Biafra frontlines as it, also, continued to make improvements in the Nigerian controlled territories from its Lagos operation.

The Red Cross airlift operation was further enhanced with six additional aircrafts: two Hercules freighters from Canadian Government and four Stratosphere freighters (Globe master) from the US Government.<sup>30</sup> There was some prospect of increase in food relief supply in Biafra. By the end of November, the kwashiorkor scourge had been brought under control, though a new menace had started – measles. UNICEF officials had projected more than a million children would suffer from it, and the death toll would be in the range of 300,000.<sup>31</sup> With the increase in the number of flight operation, the Red Cross in collaboration with Col.



Chukwuemeka Ojukwu, the Biafran leader, quickly erected a new airstrip at Obinagu to ensure a separate airport for relief landing instead of going to *Annabelle* at Uli that was the main Biafra's arms landing airport which often had to contain with constant Nigerian air strikes. However, after a few landings were made there, the Obinagu airport was destroyed by the Nigerian Dakota freighter at night. For the rest of the year, the ICRC night airlift had to continue at Uli. Early in January 1969, the ICRC airlift operation in Fernando Po was terminated by a new government in Equatorial Guinea. Few weeks afterwards, the Red Cross relocated to Cotonou in Dahomey (now Republic of Benin) with a reduced number of flights as a new operation base for airlift to Biafra.<sup>32</sup> The relief flights proceeded without incident. But, later in the course of the period, the ICRC was able to negotiate for a resumption of operation in Fernando Po. Report reveals that the combined tonnage of food per night slightly exceeded the projected estimate of 300 and, at least, a million children were getting regular access to food in Biafra.<sup>33</sup> There were signs that starvation was receding.

The morale of the International Committee of Red Cross was, however, brought so low after the Nigerian MiG-17 air fighter shot down a Red Cross plane on 5<sup>th</sup> June 1969, leaving the American Captain David Brown, two Swedes and one Norwegian dead.<sup>34</sup> Despite the gruesomeness of their murder in the hands of Nigerian air force operatives, and in utter breach of the Geneva Conventions, no serious reactions came from the Western governments including those that their nationals were killed. This sent shivers to the ICRC officials especially those in the war frontlines as the international silence emboldened Nigeria's acts of brutality and violence against non combatants Biafra civilians. The ICRC temporarily suspended its operation. Even the number of Joint Church relief flights coming into Biafra reduced. The incident helped to cultivate a change of attitude amongst Red Cross officials about the Nigerian atrocities in the war. They began to condemn and protest those unconventional actions of the Nigerian military against the Biafra civilian population. The Nigerian Government had earlier accused the ICRC of being



sympathetic to the Biafran cause. For them the ICRC was giving a lifeline to Biafra through the airlift of relief. This development the Nigerian military commanders were not comfortable with, as their use of starvation as an instrument of war against Biafra was seriously put under check. The point is that there were simmering disagreements between Nigeria and the ICRC, and the country was not ready to tolerate the effort of the Geneva based humanitarian organization in the war any longer.

On 14<sup>th</sup> June 1969, Dr Lindt, the head of Red Cross relief operation in Nigeria was arrested in Lagos for allegedly ‘flying into the airport without proper authorisation’. He was later declared *persona non grata* and the ICRC team in Nigeria was expelled.<sup>35</sup> Nigeria saw him as being politically motivated than humanitarian in his actions. It is important to point out that the denouncement of the unjust military actions of the Nigerian forces in Biafra by the Red Cross did not go down well with officials in the Nigerian Government, U.S Embassy in Nigeria and within the British Government. A source within the ICRC revealed that on several occasions the U.S Department wired danger warnings that were almost ‘non existent’ to Geneva and in one or two of the occasions pressured the ICRC to discontinue its airlift operation in Nigeria and hand over the entire relief operation to the Nigerian Government.<sup>36</sup> The Red Cross, thus, did not lack conviction there was a kind of international conspiracy cultivated in Lagos to undermine its relief effort in Nigeria. Mr Marcel Neville, the new President of the ICRC, made a number of efforts to reach a new agreement with the Nigerian Government but, none ever yielded fruit. On 20<sup>th</sup> August 1969, the Geneva based Red Cross after series of failed negotiations for relief resumption wounded up its entire relief operation in Nigeria and handed it over to the Nigerian Rehabilitation Commission.<sup>37</sup> Frederick Forsyth further posits that:

*The tragedy of the Red Cross was that it failed to understand the two immutable facts of the Nigeria-Biafra situation. One was that Ojukwu could not compromise the Biafra national security even for*



*relief aid; the other was that the Nigerian armed forces chiefs would never permit the transmission of relief aid to Biafra other than in conditions that offered themselves a substantial military advantage.<sup>38</sup>*

No gainsaying, the outcome of the Red Cross' wounding up of its operation was most telling on Biafra. A crisis stage returned. By November, almost all children were caught up by malnutrition, and the death toll was around 700 per day.<sup>39</sup> The Joint Church Aid, the French Red Cross operating from Libreville and the Irish led Africa Concern though stepped up their operations their efforts were far below what was obtained at the time ICRC was counted in the background. From the period of disengagement of the Red Cross till the war ended, the task of saving the lives of vulnerable Biafra civilian population mainly fell on the shoulders of the Church missionaries and the French Red Cross Society.

### **Challenges of the Red Cross in the Nigeria-Biafra War**

As a critical humanitarian actor in the Nigeria-Biafra War the International Committee of Red Cross could not escape the challenges brought by the war. Those challenges came in the form of humanitarian, military, political and logistic problems. One of the challenges the ICRC had to face is related to loss and diversions of relief in the process of distribution. Unlike the Joint Church Aid whose most of its composed groups notably the Catholic Caritas which already had a structure of missionaries and volunteers who had a good knowledge of the country, the Red Cross had to build its own distribution structure with much reliance on recruitment of local volunteers when it appeared it could not fly in enough volunteers. There were incidences of corruption amongst some local officials recruited to assist the ICRC distribution in several relief centers and refugee camps especially in the interior areas. Ezemere Anyaegbu recalled that a quite number of local officers of the Red Cross around Owerri area were relieved of their position for hoarding and trading the relief material entrusted on them for personal and family gain.<sup>40</sup> Thus,



complaints of sabotage on the part of local officials and volunteers exploiting the situation to enrich themselves were very common.

There were, also, instances of commandeering of relief by both Nigerian and Biafran soldiers either on suspicion or for hunger. The food shortages in several relief sharing centres as a result further compounded the problem of starvation. Related to incidences of food diversion by corrupt local officials in the distribution chain and military commandeering of relief was poor road network and movement logistics linking different interior areas. There were limited number of vehicles for relief conveyance; even the available trucks were not in good shape to penetrate the limited and poor roads in the interior. Obaigbon Oghenebor confirms that less than four trucks in a day were designated for distribution of relief by the Red Cross around Eshan area, Agbor, Umunede to Ugheli in Asaba division.<sup>41</sup> It goes on to show that the relief distribution process was riddled with some critical setbacks.

The blockade into Biafra mounted by the Nigerian forces was another great challenge that confronted the Red Cross relief operation in the war. The organisation was repeatedly and firmly refused to fly through the federal controlled airspace to land relief into Biafra. The blockade nearly could have undone the ICRC operation before it finally wound up. The Red Cross was left frustrated, and with no choice than to resort to night airlift of relief into Biafra as the Church missions were already doing. The Geneva based humanitarian organisation risked their aircrafts, relief materials, and the lives of the pilots and accompanying staff to ambush attacks from the Nigerian air forces. The most outrageous being the 5<sup>th</sup> June 1969 incident when the Nigerian air force MiG-17 shot down the Red Cross relief plane flying into Biafra killing all the four on board.<sup>42</sup> The fear of Nigeria's Russian supplied MiGs and Ilyushins fighters patrolling in the air made any pilot and aircraft trying to beat the blockade doing it at their own peril. Simon Bwacha, a retired Colonel in the Nigerian Army confirmed that there was an express order issued through the Nigerian Air Commandants to shoot down any visible object other than the Nigerian war jets flying the airspace into Biafra.<sup>43</sup> In other





words, many relief pilots were not too eager to undertake missions into Biafra. Not only that the number of Red Cross flights per day was low but, also, the amount of relief brought into Biafra was too small considering the level of humanitarian crisis it originally came to address.

When the Red Cross flights succeeded to beat the blockade, another challenge was a functional and safe airport to land the relief. Initially, Port-Harcourt seemed to have provided an answer but with the fall of Port-Harcourt and the take over of the airport by federal troops, Uli became a beehive of traffic in the night but, was too risky for the Red Cross. The landing of both arms and relief simultaneously at Uli could put its entire airlift into Biafra in a serious jeopardy as it had to meander in the midst of constant bombings of the airstrip by federal troops. The Red Cross flights into Uli had to face the risk of either being bombed or accused of smuggling arms into the rebel frontline. Uli landing was unsafe for ICRC and could raise a credibility question on its commitment to be uninvolved in political and military issues of the war. The organisation laboured hard to construct a makeshift airport at Obinagu specifically for landing of relief, having secured an agreement with Col. Ojukwu to do so. However, few weeks after it became functional, the airport at Obinagu was bombed and destroyed beyond repair by the federal air force. The incident moved the clock backward for the ICRC Biafra airlift operation. The organisation was forced to go back to making risky landing of relief at Uli. Aside the security and political problems, there was a technical challenge. The Uli airstrips were often damaged due to serial bombings from the federal forces, and key facilities for night landing were grossly lacking. Possibilities for mishaps were very much high as there were cases of crash landings. But, ordinarily this kind of problems could have been averted if the Nigerian Government had granted the ICRC the right and protection to fly their mercy planes into Biafra in daylight.



## CONCLUSION

The International Committee of Red Cross aptly played one of the most crucial roles in the Nigeria-Biafra War. Though the performance has raised some criticisms, it was selflessly heroic. They fed the hungry and starved, treated the ill and the wounded, provided makeshift shelter for the homeless, and later reported abuses in both frontlines of the war. Far from the claim that the organisation implemented a international political agenda in the war using humanitarian effort as a cover, most of the actions and decisions it took in the war were primarily dictated by reasons bordering on how to save lives of millions of civilians endangered by the war. The ICRC decision to follow the path of legality, though almost hampered its effective operation, was done to ensure that it was allowed to continue to carry out its moral obligation of saving lives of vulnerable civilians. The Biafra initial accusation that the organisation was acting a script of the federal forces and their international sympathizers was uninformed and imagined out of panic. The attitude and response of the Red Cross to the increasing humanitarian tragedy was contingent to its commitment to ensure political neutrality in the war.

Again, the Nigerian claims that the Red Cross International had bias for Biafra and covertly supported its secession cause which contributed to prolonging the war was unwarranted and sustained by political paranoia. That ICRC breached the Nigeria air blockade was only done in response to the urgency for aggressive supply of relief to at least arrest the impending humanitarian disaster in Biafra. It would be morally unjustifiable to continue to pursue the path of 'ill fated legality' while millions of children and women would continue to die. Here, humanitarian consideration supersedes every other thing. Thus, the assaults on the Red Cross flights and staff were militarily and ethically unwarranted. Both the Nigerian and Biafran sides failed to understand the nature and dictates of the Red Cross intervention in a conflict situation as much as the organisation cared less about the overriding politics and interest of the two warring sides. In all, the centrality of our argument is that the Red Cross acted more of 'selfless humanitarians' than 'political meddlers' in the Nigeria-Biafra War.



## END NOTES

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  38. Forsyth, *The Making of an African Legend...* 236



39. Forsyth, *The Making of an African Legend...* 230.
40. Ezemere Anyaegbu, 68 years, interviewed in Owerri on 17th March 2019.
41. Obaigbon Oghenebor, 71 years, interviewed in Uromi on 10th April 2019.
42. Draper, *Shadows...* 82.
43. Simon Bwacha, 62 years, interviewed at Jos on 12<sup>th</sup> September 2019.

