

OF AIRLIFT TO BIAFRA: RETHINKING EXTERNAL HUMANITARIAN INTERVENTION DURING THE NIGERIA-BIAFRA WAR, 1967-1970

Dr. Nwachukwu J. Obiakor

Department of History and International Studies

Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka

Email: nj.obiakor@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

It has been established that deprivation and starvation were deliberate weapons of warfare in the hands of Nigeria against the defunct Peoples' Republic of Biafra and her citizens during the thirty-month war that ravaged the entire Republic. Images of malnourished Biafra children posed a challenge to the international community and ultimately, at some point, became a matter of international concern. Consequently, notable international non-governmental organisations swung into action to provide succor to the Biafran civilians who were at the verge of extinction. Some notable Christian bodies like the Catholic Caritas and the World Council of Churches took charge to supply the starved Biafran children with the basic nutritional needs. Also, the International Committee of Red Cross, and doctors of several nationalities did not only provide the desperately needed health and nutritional demands of the people, they also tried to expose the humanitarian travails of Biafra to a seemingly indifferent international community. The experts noticed spiking cases of kwashiorkor and other diseases that are related to malnutrition, especially on the children. The worsening humanitarian situation compelled the non-governmental organisations to embark on very daring but dangerous missions of supplying basic human needs to a federal government blockaded Biafran enclave. The stories of the uncommon bravery of most of the international non-governmental organisations to provide the desperately needed succor to the dying Biafran non-belligerents continue to inspire popular literature of the war. There appears to be unending debates on the objective of the aid providers as different authors and commentators either argue that the aid missions were basically humanitarian or outrightly sinister. This study sets out to re-interrogate the aid operations and the politicking that appears to shroud it with the hope to provide new perspectives to some hitherto popular or unpopular positions. The study employs the historical method of research to examine the role of various non-governmental organisations in their attempts to alleviate the humanitarian problems of Biafra during the war. The study intends to choose the most relevant and insightful data from ever expanding sources, to dispassionately explicate the efforts, challenges and impact of the various humanitarian bodies that assisted Biafra during the war.

Keywords: Conflict, Humanitarian assistance, Non-governmental Organizations, Airlifts

Introduction

Pondering on warfare tends to make one lose faith in man and his ability to sustain his own existence. This statement is made based on the fact that war is destructive but the decisions of warfare are made by careful and rational actors.¹The enormity of civilian-related destructions of a war normally determines the scope of humanitarian responses by aid agencies. However, before delving into the humanitarian aid activities of the Nigeria-Biafra war, it is pertinent that we have a peek into the Nigerian situation that led to the war.

The tragic Nigerian situation, which had its high-point in the Nigeria-Biafra war, has largely been blamed on the colonial incursion and the insensitive amalgamation of divergent ethnic nationalities to exist as a nation. The situation is succinctly captured in the words of A.H.M. Kirk-Greene as documented by Olusegun Obasanjo, “The tragedy of 1967 is that many of its seeds were not, as is often claimed, sown in October or even July 1966 but in the 1950s or, as some see it, in 1914 or maybe in 1900 itself.”² Developments from the time when the British colonial administration started making tangible moves to establish the Niger area as a colony of the imperial Britain, show that integration and harmony among the people of very divergent backgrounds would be a very serious issue.

There were certain pre-independence incidences that underscored the sharp disunity in Nigeria and invariably led to the Biafra war. Glaringly, the political parties formed at the twilight of colonialism were designed for ethnic interests instead of national interest. Apart from the National Council of Nigerian Citizen (NCNC) which appeared to have a national outlook, the later Action Group (AG) and Northern Peoples’ Congress (NPC) did little to guise their regional bias.³ More appalling were the Jos massacre of 1945,⁴ and the Kano riots of 1953.⁵ In both cases, numerous Igbo lives and properties were lost.

At the turn of Nigeria’s independence in 1960, the indigenous politicians that took over the mantle of leadership proved to be grossly inept, incompetent and therefore ill-equipped to lead the nascent country. Regional and ethnic interests took precedence over national interest. As Martin Meredith puts it, “tribalism became the ideology of politics.”⁶ The politics of mutual hate and suspicion played out in numerous socio-political imbroglios that characterized the Nigerian First Republic. Unfortunately, the Nigerian government, which virtually prosecuted a war of attrition against the Eastern Region that became Biafra, tried to justify their vindictive response and atrocious war strategy on the premise of restoring the unity of a happy and harmonious country. However, Fredrick Forsyth shows that there was nothing peaceful or harmonious in the Nigeria’s First Republic, as ethnic bigotry thrived.⁷ What is more, the country’s leaders were reported to have been very corrupt. Seemingly overwhelmed by the new position of affluence and power they inherited from the departing British colonial officers,⁸ the First Republic politicians reportedly engaged in various forms of misappropriations and impunities.

The January 15, 1966 coup plotters and executors made no pretences about their motive. In a broadcast from Kaduna on the day of the first military coup d’état in Nigeria, Major Chukwuma Nzeogwu, a Sandhurst-trained officer who had led the coup, spoke on behalf of the Supreme Council of the Revolution and enunciated the purpose of the coup, which he vehemently claimed was to truncate corruption from the Nigerian system.⁹ The January coup failed and the army commander, Major-General John Aguiyi-Ironsi, rallied troops around him and seized power. Within few months a counter-coup took place. The July counter-coup was an unveiled vendetta that soon triggered a pogrom of unimaginable proportions. In addition to murdering Aguiyi-Ironsi and top military officers of Igbo extraction, northern civilians turned into militias and took to the streets, hunting down Igbo residents in different parts of the north and butchering them in cold blood. Obasanjo observes that the lack of planning and the vengeful intention of the second coup manifested itself in the chaos, confusion and the scale of unnecessary killings which spread throughout the country. He further claims that even the authors of the coup could not stem the general lawlessness and disorder, the senseless looting and killings that spread throughout the

North like wild fire.¹⁰ Of course, from other accounts, it does appear the existing military authority under a northern military junta was well aware and may have even lent a hand in the killing of hapless Igbo civilians in the North.¹¹ Watching his people butchered and the survivors made refugees in their own country; coupled with failures of peace negotiations, the Governor of Eastern Region, Col.Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, in consultation with the Eastern Consultative Assembly declared the State of Biafra on May 30, 1967, thereby seceding from Nigeria.¹² The action triggered the Nigeria-Biafra war.

Ample literature exist on the Nigeria-Biafra war. Works on the event cut across various genre of literature. Many are major players and eyewitness accounts while others attempt a reconstruction of the events of the war as objectively as possible with the aid of already available literature. Fredrick Forsyth has written extensively on the war. In his book *The Making of an African Legend: The Biafra Story*, Forsyth, among other things, gives a succinct account of the Biafran humanitarian situation and the efforts of various governmental and non-governmental organizations to alleviate the humanitarian crisis. Forsyth notes that the world (especially the west) seemed indifferent, or even aided the decimation of Biafra until the images of dying children of Biafra started pricking their conscience. Even at that, it was widely believed in the Nigerian and western quarters that Biafrans were using propaganda to play up the humanitarian situation in order to earn a political score. However, Forsyth aptly affirms that there is not one priest, doctor, relief worker or administrator from the dozen European countries who worked in Biafra throughout the last half of 1968 and watched several hundred thousand children die miserably, who could be found to suggest the issue needed any ‘play up’.¹³ In essence, Forsyth authenticates the war of attrition against the Biafrans (both combatant and non-combatants) and the seeming conspiracy of the West, which went a long way to hinder relief missions in Biafra. Michael Draper was an insider in the dangerous relief missions to Biafra and he chronicled his experience in his book entitled *Shadows: Airlift and Airwar in Biafra and Nigeria 1967-1970*. Draper provides very useful behind-the-scene accounts, which helps to provide an insight for the present study. The airlift to Biafra was second only to the Berlin Airlift of 1948-1949.¹⁴ Enormous tons of the aid materials that featured in the airlift were transported by Non-governmental Organizations and a handful of individual adventurers. Draper is quick to make it clear that the Biafran Airlift was even more daring than the Berlin Airlift as the former was basically a civilian affair and the missions mostly run at nights under very dangerous conditions.

Nigeria-Biafra war and the consequent Sufferings, Hunger and Starvation experienced by the People in Biafra Land

The Nigeria-Biafra war is one of the most discussed subjects of the history of Nigeria. One of the questions that trigger debate on the subject was the nature of the secession. In essence, was the secession a unilateral declaration by Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu, (the Governor of Eastern region, who later became the leader of Biafra), or was it a consensual agreement among stakeholders of Biafra? Olusegun Obasanjo inferred that Ojukwu wanted secession because of his ambition to rule a nation. In that regard, Obasanjo wrote thus about Ojukwu and the act of secession, “...if he could not achieve his long-cherished ambition of ruling an independent Nigeria, he should break it up and rule an independent and sovereign ‘Biafra’”¹⁵ This statement suggests a unilateral declaration of Biafra by Ojukwu. From Obasanjo’s account it is clear how some interests trivialised the pogrom and other ill treatments meted out against the people of Eastern Nigeria. It is obvious that there is no evidence whatsoever to substantiate the insinuation that Ojukwu only

wanted a sovereign state to rule. Chinua Achebe in his treaties on the war shows that there was a spontaneous consensus to declare Biafra.¹⁶

In retrospect, it is natural that the Eastern Region stakeholders spontaneously decided to sever themselves from a people that were clearly bent on conducting an ethnic purge, or at best alienate them in the scheme of things in the country. Godwin Alabi-Isama explicitly narrates how Igbo military officers were assassinated by their own colleagues, friends and sub-ordinates in the force after the July 1966 counter coup.¹⁷ Worse still, as already mentioned in this paper, murdering of Igbo unarmed civilians in the North became a daily routine.

However, irrespective of the nature of the decision to secede, the act set in motion the rapid military events that culminated into one of the bloodiest strife in the post-colonial Africa. Evidences show that the federal government of Nigeria had earlier engaged in arms pileup in anticipation of the Eastern Region secession.¹⁸ The Nigerian government was clearly at advantage as regards arms acquisition for a number of reasons. First, the Nigerian economy was already experiencing boom at the time considering enormous exports from agricultural produce. By 1966-1967, agriculture accounted for 63 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product,¹⁹ and by that time some oil-producing South-eastern areas were captured from Biafra at the early stage of the war, Nigeria experienced an important diversification in exports which increased its foreign exchange earnings. Commenting on the changes in the country's economy during the war, the authors of the Second National Development Plan pointed out, "the civil war marked a threshold when the national economy was freeing itself from the strait-jacket of agricultural export earnings as its determinant of growth."²⁰ Obviously, Nigeria expended enormous funds procuring arms for the war. From an account of a British expatriate in the country at the time, ALJ Venter, few days before the hostilities, Nigerian government purchased several Warsaw Pact Jet trainers: a squadron of Czechoslovakian Aero L-29 Delfin trainer-fighter jets.²¹ As the war progressed, the Nigerian government went ahead to purchase more sophisticated jets and other war machines.

Robust economy alone could not have given the Nigerians an edge in the arms race and concomitantly the war. A very important factor that aided the procurement of arms by the Nigerian government was its cordial relationship with most super powers of the world. The relationship between Nigeria and Britain at the time was almost to a point of conviviality and this informed the school of thought which believed that the former colonial power was in a direct conspiracy with the federal government of Nigeria to ensure suppression and obliteration of Biafra. At the time of the coup, Harold Wilson was Prime Minister of Britain – and aware that Britain's oil supplies were threatened by Biafra seceding, he formed an alliance with the Soviets to help crush the breakaway state by supplying the Lagos Government with all the weapons it needed.²² Of course, the Wilson government put up all sorts of excuses for aiding Nigeria to crush Biafra. One of such excuses is that the emerging republic was not going to survive as an independent state.²³ The irony of the statement lies on the documented potentials of Biafra and its obvious capability to not just survive but become an African power.²⁴ The excuse of Wilson's government is, therefore, lame and morally unjustifiable.

The connivance of the British, Soviet Union; and the indifference of many other powerful and influential global actors paved the way for unrestricted and unchecked war of attrition against

Biafra, which principally took its toll on the vulnerable non-combatants of Biafra, whose thresholds became the theatre of warfare. Pushed to the edge by ethnic cleansing across the country and the violation of the Aburi Accord (which was the last failed attempt to avoid war), the Biafran republic came to be.

The federal government of Nigeria went to war with Biafra believing they could rout the newly declared sovereign state in few months and reintegrate it into Nigeria. This fact is made clear by Obasanjo in his account of the strategic and tactical plan of the Nigerian military. Obasanjo writes, "Army headquarters' operational plan envisaged a war that would be waged in four phases and that would be over within a month with the capture of Enugu. The phases were: (1) capture of Nsukka, (2) capture of Ogoja, (3) capture of Abakiliki, (4) capture of Enugu."²⁵ In fact, the defeat of Biafra appeared so easy that Col. Hassan predicted that the war would end within forty-eight hours.²⁶ Of course, this is grossly underrating the resolve of a people who appeared to have been marked for annihilation in their supposed country. In fact, the federal government of Nigeria initiated what it called OP UNICORD, which was the code name of the "police action" against the Biafrans.²⁷ Obasanjo documented the surprising resistance of the Biafrans and the initial shock of the Nigerians when he writes thus:

Resistance by rebel troops to 21 Battalion advance was sporadic until the battalion arrived at Obukpa. Here the rebels successfully attacked the battalion from the air using the obsolete American B26, piloted by a quiet Pole called Brown and nicknamed Kamikaze for his dare-devil exploits. Its effect on troops' morale was enormous.²⁸

Rather frustrated by the stiff resistance put up by the rather ill-equipped Biafran forces, the Nigerian government adopted war strategies that obviously targeted non-combatants. Of course, studying the war efforts of Nigeria, one would easily be convinced that the federal government engaged Biafra in an irresponsible warfare, obviously to cut costs of the war (both human and material). This assertion is made taking cognizance of Aja Akpuru-Aja's comment on warfare that, "nations cannot wage war responsibly without suffering unacceptable human and financial costs of war."²⁹ Aja's assertion, therefore, raises the question of responsibility in the military approach of Nigeria. Chinua Achebe documented a situation during the war where word reached the Biafran authorities that the Nigerians had classified information about the location of civilian hideout shelter.³⁰ Obviously, these vulnerable areas were already marked to be strafed. Such approach could not be termed responsible warfare and the result was increased hardship, suffering and starvation of the people of Biafra.

The first signs of irresponsible war approach by the Nigerian troops came when the peripheral provinces of Biafra, which were mostly minority non-Igbo areas of the nascent republic, started falling to the federal forces and concomitantly occupied. Immediately after the conquest of some of the minority provinces of Biafra, many of the indigenous people of the places stayed behind and were converted by the invaders into believing in "one Nigeria". Some of these indigenous people were made to occupy the attractive offices of the provinces' public service previously occupied by their kinsmen who had fled or were killed. Many of those who occupied the offices did so for self-aggrandizement, but before long, the occupying Nigeria forces started making life quite unbearable for them. It was reported that the occupying federal troops were so irresponsible

that they killed the people's livestock for their own kitchens; harvested unripe yam and cassava crops (which was actually a taboo in most of the communities)³¹ for their own consumption; and worse still, confiscated indigenous girls and women who they converted to domestic and sex slaves. When the people protested, they contained the protests by punitive raids, and allegedly forced villagers to watch public executions of revered village chiefs and elders. The occupying forces went ahead to shut down schools and converted them to Army barracks. They enriched themselves in 'black market' deals in relief food supposed for the needy; looted desirable properties and generally made it clear that they were there to stay and intended to live off the land, and live well.³² The foregoing irresponsible approach of the Nigerian military caused a massive refugee situation in the unoccupied Biafra territories as the people who initially stayed behind began to move out in droves into the core of Biafra.³³ Concomitantly, suffering, hunger and starvation started to mount in the Biafran enclave.

Much has been written and debated on the Nigerian war policy of starvation against the Biafran populace which was intended to force them into submission. There is a very big moral question on the stance and decision of the federal government to deliberately starve women and children, irrespective of the fact that a war was going on. The utterances of some Nigerian top politicians and military officers suggested a people who were bent on possibly annihilating an enemy, who was of a deeply hated ethnicity. Anthony Enahoro, the Nigeria's Commissioner for Information and Labour was known to have asserted that "starvation is a legitimate weapon of war."³⁴ Worse still, a rather notorious top military officer of the Nigerian army during the war, Brig. Benjamin Adekunle was known to have retorted thusly "I want to see no Red Cross, no Caritas, no World Council of Churches, no Pope, no missionary and no U.N. delegation. I want to prevent even one Ibo(sic) having even one thing to eat before their capitulation."³⁵ Based on these and similar hate-filled rhetoric and the genocidal war policies that accompanied them, Dr. Mensah of Ghana declared "Finally, I am of the opinion that in many of the cases cited to me hatred of the Biafrans (mainly Igbo) and a wish to exterminate them was a foremost motivational factor."³⁶ Achebe goes on to make a documentation of individuals and bodies that made a case for the genocidal intents of the federal government of Nigeria during the war.³⁷ The high point of the notorious Nigerian federal government policy to starve who they termed an enemy is the unguarded utterance of a highly revered and respected Nigerian statesman, who was a member of the war cabinet of Gowon's Nigerian government, Chief Obafemi Awolowo. Awolowo is known to have declared that "all is fair in war, and starvation is one of the weapons of war. I don't see why we should feed our enemies fat in order for them to fight harder."³⁸

As the war progressed, Biafran circles continued to shrink and the blockade of essential supplies thickened. Note that by May 1967, the federal government had imposed an economic blockade on the Eastern Region. A further economic sanction on the region in later months deepened the socio-economic woes of the people. By then, there was already serious strain on the essential utility in Biafra owing to the population explosion caused by the massive influx of easterners that migrated from the north during the 1966 pogrom. The economic blockade therefore exacerbated the humanitarian situation that had developed in Biafra.³⁹ James M. Clevenger highlights the enormity of the deliberate starvation of Biafrans and its impact when he states:

Siege warfare has a long, if not particularly illustrious, history. Reduction of an enemy through interdiction of his food and/or other supplies played a major role in medieval warfare, the

Napoleonic era, and in both World Wars. Few economic blockades in history have, however, had the dramatic impact of the one imposed on Eastern Nigeria.⁴⁰

Clevenger's assertion of the great impact of the economic blockade imposed on Biafra is based on the widespread starvation, diseases and death that plagued the people throughout the period of warfare and even a bit beyond. Starvation and diseases may have been more responsible for civilian deaths in Biafra than direct military actions. As the war progressed, the famine worsened. The traditional Igbo society of farmers could not plant their crops due to the reduction of the Biafran area by the advancing Nigerian army and the constant strafing of civilian areas by the Nigerian warplanes and mortars. Of course, Gowon had succeeded in cutting Biafra off from the sea, robbing its inhabitants of shipping ports to receive military and humanitarian supplies.⁴¹ The immediate effects of the ensuing famine in Biafra were health afflictions, which were mostly marasmus and kwashiorkor. As a result, the Biafran landscape was filled by increasing number of scavenger animals, particularly the vulture as corpses littered the roadsides. Some estimates are that over a thousand Biafrans a day were perishing by the time, and at the height of Gowon's economic blockade, upward of fifty thousand Biafran civilians, most of them babies, children, and women, were dying every single minute.⁴²

Biafra was able to win certain level of global sympathy when the realities of horrible social conditions in Biafra started to be publicized effectively. On November 17, 1968, Senator Edward M. Kennedy of the United States dramatically underscored the situation in Biafra:

The loss of life from starvation continues at more than 10,000 persons per day-over 1,000,000 lives in recent months. Without emergency measures now, the number will climb to 25,000 per day within a month-and some 2,000,000 deaths by the end of the year. The new year will only bring greater disaster to a people caught in the passion of a fratricidal war. Crop exhaustion in combat areas will put over 8,000,000 men, women and children in the clutches of total starvation.⁴³

However, their plight did not markedly improve as the Nigerian and Biafran governments failed to agree on the conditions under which outside relief would be allowed into Biafra. Be that as it may, Ojukwu's propaganda continued to prick the conscience of the western world, and efforts to take relief materials to Biafra intensified.⁴⁴ Many of the brave and daring airlifts to Biafra were done as a response to Ojukwu's propaganda.

Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Humanitarian Assistance in Biafra:

- **The Role of International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC)**

A glimmer of hope of survival started appearing on the Biafra side as international non-governmental organizations began to make practical moves to take relief materials to the dying people or even to conduct an evacuation. The image of dying children of Biafra became a moral burden onto the global community. The International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC) was one of the NGOs that made an initial swift response to the plight of the Biafra non-belligerents. The ICRC has been in existence since 1863 and was established in Nigeria in 1960. Since its inception, the ICRC operationalized its mission to humanize war through different victim categories, which allowed for different kinds of responses to suffering, ranging from sick and

wounded combatants to include shipwrecked combatants, prisoners of war and detainees and, finally after the World War II, civilians in international and internal wars.⁴⁵ The ICRC faced certain difficulties after the World War II as its operations and resources were stretched and depleted. In addition, it was severely criticized for its failure to help the victims of the Nazi genocide and prisoners from the eastern front. Therefore, in the mid-1960s, the organization had not fully recovered from its difficulties occasioned by the world war.⁴⁶

However, the Nigeria-Biafra war presented a new challenge to the ICRC and further modified its mode of operations. It is worthy of note that during the Nigeria-Biafra war the ICRC resources were stretched further as there were more situations requiring the organization's attention. Of course there were the Vietnam War, the Arab-Israeli conflict, Yemen crisis and the Greek political prisoners, all requiring the urgent attention of the ICRC.⁴⁷ As the Nigeria-Biafra war raged on the ICRC became involved in the war zone by offering its services to the belligerents. The first step was to inquire after the fate of prisoners of war and to support the activities of the local Red Cross by providing equipment and medical staff. At the end of 1967, the ICRC also started relief operations for civilians affected by the war on both sides of the front line. When famine took hold in Biafra in 1968, this became the organization's main focus. The challenge was to feed a population of several million people in complex circumstances. For the ICRC, the main stumbling block was the difficulty of obtaining the consent of the belligerents to bring aid into Biafra, which as noted earlier was blockaded by the Nigerian government. While the government accepted the principle, it wanted control over what was delivered and how, in order to assert its sovereignty over the "breakaway province". Conversely, the Biafran authorities tried to impose their own conditions on relief efforts in order to show that they were not subjected to the whims of the federal government.⁴⁸ Some details on the politics of humanitarian assistance to Biafra are discussed in the next section of this paper.

The humanitarian intervention of the ICRC, especially their earlier response, may have been made a bit smoother by the earlier visit of the organization's Delegate General in Africa, George Hoffmann. Obviously envisaging conflict, Hoffmann made a series of visitations to Nigeria from 1965 to 1967. His preparatory activities consisted of analyzing the Nigerian context, establishing a foundation for cooperation with both sides, and drawing on past Red Cross experiences from international conflict and natural disasters. In addition, Hoffmann engaged in diplomatic talks with the political leaders to receive assurances that the provisions of the Geneva Conventions would be applied in the event of war.⁴⁹

By December 1967, the ICRC had approached the government of Nigeria in Lagos requesting to supply aid to Biafra. The request involved just one flight into Port Harcourt (a major city of Biafra) with a team of Red Cross doctors and a consignment of urgently required essential medical supplies. There was an initial hiccup to the operation of Red Cross as the leaders of the two warring parties refused to agree on terms of such supply mission. Nonetheless, by December 19 the ICRC was able to make a breakthrough that would enable it make a relief flight to Port Harcourt, though at its own risk. ICRC, instead of flying from Lagos flew from the nearby island of Fernando Po. The island, part of Spanish Equatorial Guinea, was just less than 150 miles from Port Harcourt and offered a better opportunity for maximizing the number of flights in the two-night window. A Balair DC6B (HB-IEU), which had been chartered by the ICRC, made several flights from Santa Isabel, Fernando Po airport to Port Harcourt, Biafra on December 20, 1967.⁵⁰

After some hiccups and negations bordering on terms of flying reliefs to Biafra, the ICRC was said to have been able to obtain another concession from Lagos to fly relief to Biafra. This time it involved a regular shuttle of flights from Fernando Po to Port Harcourt with, it seemed, no time limit. Flights by the Balair DC-6B resumed and continued until mid-January 1968 when, without prior warning, General Gowon promptly rescinded all prior agreements.⁵¹ What may have prompted Gowon's decision is analyzed in the next section of this paper.

The malnutrition situation in Biafra skyrocketed by mid-1968 and malnutrition-related fatalities reached alarming rate that public opinion in the western world began to emphasize urgency in saving the children of Biafra. Reports on the dire situation in Biafra originated from the representative of several relief organizations on ground, notable among who was Henrich Jaggi. Jaggi was an ICRC man of Swiss origin. At that time, he was working for the organization in Biafra. Jaggi's reports highlighted a widespread protein deficiency that had already resulted in outbreaks of two associated diseases, marasmus and kwashiorkor.⁵²

Reports from Jaggi and the images of dying Biafran children must have energized the ICRC, because despite the difficulties in obtaining permission to fly reliefs into Biafra, in September 1968, the ICRC was able to establish an airlift for Biafra. However, in accordance with the principle of impartiality and to avoid operating only on the Biafran side, it also setup and coordinate relief operation in the areas recaptured by the federal army, where it had to contend with major logistical problems. This operation lasted until the summer of 1969, at which time the Nigerian government took an increasingly hard line. The ICRC Commissioner General of the Nigeria-Biafra operation was declared *persona non grata* in Nigerian territory and to make matters worse, an aircraft, part of the Red Cross airlift, was shot down. The Nigerian government decided to take over there relief operation in the federal territory. This change in attitude forced the ICRC to reconsider its involvement and, unable to negotiate an agreement between the belligerents, the organization suspended the Biafra airlift. The second half of 1969 therefore saw the ICRC gradually winding down its activities in the conflict, although it pursued its traditional tasks and maintained its medical teams in Biafra. The surrender of Biafra in January 1970 put an end to humanitarian operations in Biafra.⁵³

- **The Role of Joint Church Aid – Jesus Christ Airlines – (JCA)**

Heinrich Jaggi, in his explication of the nutritional crisis in Biafra went on to suggest to his superiors in Geneva that they launch a limited international appeal for medicine, food and clothing.⁵⁴ Jaggi and the ICRC were not alone in the attempt to salvage the humanitarian situation in Biafra as a similar call for relief aid had also gone out from a group of Catholic and Protestant missionaries in Biafra. Aengus Finucane, one of hundreds of Irish Catholic priests based in Biafra at the time narrated the part of the sad story of the people which he and his colleagues witnessed. "Each morning when we came out of the house there were people gathered everywhere, begging for help. Children were crying...people were dying all around us...parents were crying as they buried their children."⁵⁵ Finucane's narration represents the very sad and hopeless situation of the vulnerable ones in Biafra. A situation which many people of the outside world refused to give timely appreciation. The situation was unbearable for both the victims and the observing missionary workers, who had lived with the people for a long time and had established warm bond with them. In that regard, Finucane continued, "I knew a lot of these

people, because I had lived among them in the parish. As a young priest I was not prepared to deal with this – it was unimaginable.”⁵⁶

Of course, without waiting for adequate response from the outside world, the church swung into action. Initially a group of foreign missionaries in Umuahia concentrated on hiring medical staff for those hospitals within Biafra and under the control of foreign medical missions. Subsequently, when the amount of aid increased dramatically, the group concentrated on organizing the flow of relief aid inside Biafra. Under the leadership of three missionary doctors developed the World Council of Churches Refugee Relief Operation in Biafra and which became based upon the fusion of effort between the Christian Council of Biafra and the World Council of Churches in Geneva.⁵⁷

The Joint Church Aid (JCA) was not formed immediately the Christian missionaries started the awareness campaign of the Biafran social situation. As could be seen from the previous paragraph, missionaries swung into action to salvage the situation on different scales and capacities. Concern for the situation in Nigeria, had first been highlighted by the Catholic Church in December 1967 when two Monsignors, George Rocheau and Dominic Conway were asked by the Vatican to undertake, on its behalf, a peace mission to Lagos and Kaduna. The mission also visited the Biafran town of Onitsha. The two Monsignors did visit Lagos for an audience with General Gowon who, in turn, offered freedom to travel only in areas that the government of Federal Nigeria could guarantee their safety.⁵⁸ Consequently, many areas of Biafra were not visited and the Biafran authorities saw it as a snub from the Monsignors. In reaction, they appointed Father Anthony Byrne (the Director of Catholic Social Services in Biafra) to travel to Rome and help resolve the overall situation.⁵⁹ This marked the beginning of what later became the JCA that conducted one of the biggest civilian airlifts in history.

Byrne's efforts in Rome brought the Vatican envoy to Biafra. The envoy sent report of their findings to Rome and the Pope reacted swiftly. Pope Paul IV commissioned Monsignor Jean Rodhain and Monsignor Carlo Bayer, respectively the President and Secretary-General of CARITAS International, to establish a relief program for both sides of the conflict. In turn, Father Anthony Byrne was appointed as Director of the CARITAS operation in Biafra. On the efficacy of the decision of the Vatican, Draper comments, “It was, with hindsight, quite a momentous decision to have taken and had a far-reaching effect on the manner in which the massive relief airlift to Biafra was operated.”⁶⁰

Byrne made a couple of daring airlifts to Biafra's Port Harcourt under the flagship of the CARITAS before the federal troops captured the city. He contracted the famous American gunrunner, Captain Hank Wharton, who had been sending supply of arms to Biafra,⁶¹ and Wharton barely completed three deliveries to Port Harcourt when the city fell in May 1968.⁶² Nonetheless, the priest was not deterred. At the fall of Port Harcourt, the famous Uli airstrip, which was codenamed Annabelle, was opened. The ingenuity of the Biafrans and the daredevil bravado of the airlift pilots and crews that landed on the dimly lit runway of Annabelle have inspired severe literature of different genre. 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).⁶³

The formation of the JCA is also greatly attributed to the efforts of Pastor Lothar Kuehl, the chaplain of the German Protestant community in Lisbon. His presence in Portugal, the only country in the world that maintained direct flight with Biafra at the time, proved very providential: it offered his humanitarian outlook a welcome outlet. Through his indefatigable efforts, relief packets of essential drugs and foodstuffs collected in Germany by both Catholic and Protestant churches were flown to Port Harcourt by buying space in planes belonging to Wharton. As an accomplished pilot, he sometimes acted as co-pilot of the planes that flew into the enclave and thus was enabled to provide the early photos of the horror prevalent there. His meeting with Fr. Tony Byrne in January 1968 marked a turning point in the ecumenical effort of the churches. The combination of Byrne and Kuehl, the former being representative of both the Biafran bishops and CARITAS and the latter representative of the World Council of Churches (WCC), gave the airlift a new impetus that propelled and sustained it till the formation of the JCA.⁶⁴

In November 1968, the Protestant and Catholic relief agencies organized themselves into a confederation known as Joint Church Aid (JCA). It took the cooperation of church groups from 33 countries to form the Joint Church Aid. The JCA was created following a meeting convened in Rome on November 8-9, 1968 by Monsignor Bayer of Caritas Internationalis. The Rome meeting was called to address the issues of technical and economic ways of increasing the volume of airlift to Biafra.⁶⁵

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.⁶⁶ Interestingly, the works of the JCA continued in the former Biafran enclave three years after the war before they finally pulled out and the communities effectively adopted the self-help approach,⁶⁷ which has been basically responsible for the swift recovery and development of the communities of today's Southeastern states.

Oxfam and other Humanitarian Assistance to Biafra

Aside the relief efforts of the ICRC and the JCA, many other non-governmental organizations, joined the fray to save Biafra or not to allow Biafra to die. One of the NGOs that made outstanding contribution to the relief of Biafra was Oxfam. The name Oxfam comes from the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief. The organization was founded in 1942 during World War II with the purpose of campaigning for food for the starving women and children of the allied blockaded Nazi occupied countries, notably Greece. After the war, Oxfam continued its work, sending materials and financial aid to groups aiding poor people throughout Europe. As the

situation in Europe improved, Oxfam's attention shifted to the people in need in developing countries.⁶⁸

The involvement of Oxfam and some other British-based charity NGOs in Biafra was basically triggered off by the media. As already established elsewhere in this study, 1968 proved a pivotal year. According to Forsyth, the coverage and exposition of the humanitarian situation inside Biafra was credited to Michael Leapman of the *Sun* and Brian Dixon of the *Daily Sketch*, who were reporting from inside Biafra.⁶⁹ In June a film broadcast on British television and a press campaign by the *Sun* newspaper sparked the humanitarian response into life. Britain's sense of responsibility towards its former colonial territory combined with the birth of a new form of global humanitarian concern. By the end of July Oxfam and Save the Children Fund (SCF) relief teams had transferred to Nigeria to work with the ICRC.⁷⁰

Oxfam's arrival in Biafra was preceded by a fact-finding mission by its Director, Leslie Kirkley. In the middle of June 1968, Kirkley, arrived Biafra for a fifteen-day tour. As Forsyth puts it, what he saw disquieted him badly.⁷¹ Before leaving Biafra Kirkley gave a press conference in which he estimated that unless substantial larger quantities of relief food came into Biafra within six weeks, up to 400,000 children would pass into the "no hope" period and die of kwashiorkor. Kirkley went ahead to propose daily 300 tons of relief materials to Biafra avert the impending tragedy. Kirkley's exposition, especially his presentation on BBC current affairs television program, largely doused the cynicism of the British public, who hitherto tended to view the humanitarian reports from Biafra as Ojukwu's propaganda. Kirkley went ahead to meet with Heinrich Jaggi of ICRC and General Ojukwu, during which the Biafran leader had offered to put not any one, but his best airfield exclusively at the disposal of the relief organizations.⁷²

Oxfam worked in collaboration with the ICRC. Another notable secular relief NGO to Biafra was the Africa Concern. Africa Concern (created in March 1968 in direct response to the crisis, and now known as Concern Worldwide) collected over IR£1 million in the course of the relief effort, and drew the Irish public into new territory in its engagement with the developing world.⁷³ Apart from the NGOs, some governments of the world, at some point got directly involved in the humanitarian assistance to Biafra. Notable was the efforts of the United States' Air Force under president Richard Nixon, who showed some sympathy for Biafra. Between 7 and 8 June 1968 the US Air Force airlifted 34 tons of food and medical supplies to Biafra using the jet C-141. The air force organization involved in the mission was the 9th Mil Alft Sq.⁷⁴ The US Air Force conducted a repeat of the relief airlift mission on January 27 and February 10, 1970. This time they supplied 436.5 tons of trucks, generators, blankets, hospital equipment, kerosene lamps, and other relief cargo. The air force organizations involved in the mission were 436th, 437th, and 438th Mil Alft Wgs. with six C-141 Starlifter cargo jets.⁷⁵

The Politics of Humanitarian Assistance to Biafra

It has been strongly argued that the relief to Biafra ended up elongating the war. In essence, without the relief Biafra could have capitulated earlier than it did. Considering this view, it is quite clear why the federal military government of Nigeria insisted on the blockade or at to best monitor the relief missions to Biafra. There was an obvious plan to starve Biafra to surrender and sadly, the Nigerian government was not alone in executing the plan as there are evidences of British involvement (especially before mid-1968 when media expositions on the humanitarian

situation in Biafra and concomitant public opinion forced the Whitehall to review its stance to some extent) in what became one of the mostly obnoxious imperialistic conspiracies of the post-independence Nigeria. As Forsyth rightly observes:

...the starvation of the Biafrans was not an accident, or a mischance, or even a necessary but regrettable by-product of the war. It was a deliberately executed and integral part of the Nigerian war policy. The Nigerian leaders, with commendably greater frankness than the British ever got from their leaders, made few bones about it.⁷⁶

By “making few bones” about their deliberate starvation of the Biafrans, Forsyth was obviously referring to the statements credited to Obafemi Awolowo that starvation is a legitimate weapon of warfare, which was echoed by Anthony Enahoro and brutally implemented by Brig. Benjamin Adekunle and his likes.

In order to legitimize its blockade of Biafra, the Gowon’s Nigerian military government continuously made reference to the Article 23 of the Geneva Convention on its right as the blocking power to control and determine the arrangement for sending in supplies into the Biafran territory. According to Article 23, the blocking power in an armed conflict has the right to determine the arrangement, which includes inspection and shipment of supplies in the event of the relaxation of such an economic blockade if such supplies were to be sent into the blockaded territory. This was to avoid the use of such relaxation as a conduit for the shipment of arms or contraband into the blockaded territory.⁷⁷

Ojukwu and the leadership of Biafra obviously appreciated the hiccups presented by the said Geneva Convention and made efforts to separate arms shipment from relief missions. As mentioned earlier here, Ojukwu offered to put his best airfield exclusively at the disposal of the relief organizations in his meeting with the representatives of ICRC and JCA. As Forsyth puts it, this arrangement was meant to separate the arms airlift from the food airlift and enhance the chances of Nigeria granting daylight access for the mercy planes. The Nigerian government neglected this effort and continued its blockade. In fact, at the persuasion of the Director of Oxfam, Leslie Kirkley, the British government sent a request to Gowon asking him to permit daylight flights of the Red Cross planes into Biafra. Gowon blatantly told the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson that he would order any Red Cross planes flying in to be shot down.⁷⁸

Apart from what appeared to be an attempt to restore cordiality between Nigeria and Britain, after turning down the request to let in Red Cross planes in the daytime to Biafra, the Nigerian government continued to frustrate the efforts of other international bodies and prominent individuals to establish a mercy corridor to Biafra. To mitigate the slap on the British face, on July 8, 1968 the Nigerian Foreign Minister, Mr. Okoi Arikpo, held a press conference in Lagos in which he proposed a land corridor. Food would be brought in by ship to Lagos. From there it would be airlifted to Enugu, safely in Nigerian hands, and then convoyed by road, in the hopes that the Biafrans would come and take it.⁷⁹

According to Forsyth, the proposal was hailed by the British government and press as a most magnanimous gesture. However, Forsyth goes on to critically analyze the gesture which he later exposed as an ordinary political gimmick. He posits that no one bothered to point out that it was as expensive to bring ship into Lagos as into Sao Tome, or Fernando Po, or the Niger River; or that an airlift from Lagos to Enugu was as expensive as an airlift from Sao Tome to Annabelle;

or that Nigerians had said an airlift could not work due to weather conditions, lack of planes and pilots; or that they did not have the trucks to run a shuttle of 300 tons a day from Enugu to Awgu; or that bitter fighting was going on around Awgu still. Forsyth poked holes in the proposal by the Nigerian government saying that agreement to the idea as elaborated by Arikpo was not necessary, since the cooperation of the Biafrans in the plan was not required. He goes on to assert that not one packet of dried milk powder was ever taken to Awgu for use inside unoccupied Biafra, or laid on the road for the Biafrans to pick up. So far one can discern this was never even intended.⁸⁰ Going by Forsyth's analysis, the Nigerian acceptance for relief to Biafra at the time reeked of deceitful politicking.

On the appeal from international bodies and individuals, from 20 to 26 July 1968, efforts were made under the Organization of African Unity (OAU) Consultative Committee at Niamey to secure an agreement on a cease-fire and a "mercy corridor," an establishment of either an airlift by day or a land or water corridor to reach the Biafran enclave in the face of the blockade. The Niamey meeting had the question of the opening of the mercy corridor as the main object of the discussion, a prelude to the follow-up Addis Ababa peace settlement talks in September 1968. However, the effort especially of its chair at the time, H. I. M. Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, did not yield much fruit. Similar efforts by Pope Paul VI who appealed to the parties for negotiations did not change the belligerents' hard stance.⁸¹

The hard stance on the part of Biafra was basically on the insistence of its authorities not to accept any cargo of supplies that had been inspected in Lagos in line with the condition specified by the Nigerian authorities. Biafra's reason hinged on the perception of herself as a sovereign state after receiving recognition from a few, mostly African countries such as Gabon, Ivory Coast, Tanzania, and Zambia, as well as Haiti. This position was supported by a few people who believed that on account of Biafra's recognition by these countries, this was no longer a civil war but an international war.⁸² Then there was also the fear of food poisoning by the Nigerian government. This fear was occasioned by the incidents of people dying mysteriously after eating foodstuffs brought across the Niger in the Midwest by *bona fide* 'contrabandiers'. An analysis of samples made at Ihiala hospital laboratory revealed that white arsenic and other toxic substances had been present in the food.⁸³

Evidences also show that the Nigerian government may have directly tried to sabotage relief efforts to Biafra by clandestinely attempting to or destroying relief cargos to Biafra. A relief pilot tells a story how he and his crew narrowly escaped death when a bomb was planted on their relief super constellation en route Biafra with relief supply. The plane had exploded in Bissalanca Airport in Portuguese Bissau during maintenance. According to Jim Townsend, a mercenary pilot that flew supplies to Biafra, who gave credence to the act of sabotage from the Nigerian side:

...Much later I learned that one of the American flight captains (no names) who had been at the controls of the other Constellation had been nobbled by a Nigerian agent and 'persuaded' to stop our flight, 'at whatever the cost'. He had taken it on himself to plant the bomb – and the way I understood it, the device should have exploded while we were in the air somewhere between Bissau and

Nigeria. Truth is, we were damned lucky to have been delayed in Bissau.⁸⁴

Of course, the Nigerian authority had cause to believe that the relief services were used as cover to airlift arms to Biafra. When the ICRC were given initial concession by Gowon's government in Lagos to airlift relief materials into Biafra, there were reports that the missions were accompanied by gunrunners who used the opening to airlift arms into Biafra. Consequently, Gowon revoked the concession.⁸⁵

The involvement of some of the relief agencies and organizations in the Nigerian Civil War was purely humanitarian and devoid of politics. ICRC's involvement and its assumption of the coordination of the first emergency relief operation and later rehabilitation work were based on international humanitarian law. The JCA's activities showed undiluted passion to save the starving and the dying. Unlike the ICRC, their mission was not restricted by conventions; therefore, they employed any means possible to airlift basic needs to the Biafran children.

Conclusion

To many of the relief organizations in Biafra, especially the JCA, the moral obligation of helping to feed hungry people had proven to be far greater than the political obligation of simply maintaining a good relationship with the federal government. As the war progressed and as the circle around Biafra tightened, starvation and the concomitant diseases and death became a moral burden to aid NGOs. Earlier, the western countries remained indifferent with the event in Nigeria and Biafra and generally regarded reports of humanitarian crisis as Biafran propaganda. However, the missionaries and representatives of aid NGOs on ground saw the precarious situation and swung into action to effect what became the biggest civilian airlift in history.

By the time the airlift began in earnest in mid-1968, many Biafran children had reached the point of "no hope" as kwashiorkor had taken a heavy toll on them. Had the relief NGOs waited for another couple of months, deaths from starvation in Biafra may have doubled or tripled the number that was eventually recorded. To better appreciate the dire situation in Biafra, the Biafra authority employed the media services of an Irish media firm and it went a long way to demonstrate the humanitarian crisis. Freelance journalists also covered the events and presented them as realistically as possible, thereby going a long way to awaken the conscience of the world and in furtherance save a lot of Biafran lives.

In two years, the JCA flew 5,314 missions, carrying 60,000 tons of humanitarian aid as Nigerian anti-aircraft guns and fighter planes tried – and almost failed – to bring them down. Twenty-five air crews were lost but many hundreds of thousands of lives were saved.⁸⁶ As the crisis raged, a welter of outsiders trying to help, or just help themselves poured into the fray. These included politicians, journalists, camera-men, philanthropists, doctors, pilots and pundits; along with mercenaries, arms dealers, oilmen, conmen and call-girls.⁸⁷

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