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## COUNTING THE COST: THE POLITICS OF RELIEF OPERATIONS IN THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR, A CRITICAL APPRAISAL

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**ABSTRACT** This study examines the role of international humanitarian organizations and the politics of relief operations during the Nigerian Civil War. It investigates the nexus between the politicization of humanitarian operations during the three-year conflict, and the death, hunger and starvation of millions of Biafrans. The study explores how the triangular politics among the Federal Military Government of Nigeria, the Biafran authorities, and the humanitarian organizations, in particular, the International Committee of the Red Cross impacted on the women, children and the elderly in Biafra. The author argues that the issue of sovereignty was only a cover to politicize the relief assistance going to Biafra and consequently abort the operations, thus, serving as a war strategy for both the Nigerian and Biafran authorities.

**Key Words:** Propaganda; International Committee of the Red Cross; Biafra; Civil War; Mark Press.

### INTRODUCTION

The contradictions in Nigerian politics, including the interventions of the military, gave way to what stood out as one of the most brutal civil wars in Africa in the second half of the twentieth century. The politicization of the relief operations during the war caused serious humanitarian challenges and heightened the human suffering in Biafra. The triangular politics between the humanitarian organizations, the Federal Military Government (FMG) of Nigeria, and the Biafran authorities impacted the most vulnerable, the women, children and the elderly in Biafra, who were neither considered nor consulted in the war. It led to hunger, starvation and death that otherwise could possibly have been avoided. This paper therefore examines the connection between the politicization of humanitarian operations during the three-year conflict and the death, hunger and starvation of millions of Biafrans. The paper explores the impact of this politics on the women, children and the elderly in Biafra, who suffered the most. It also investigates the centrality of state sovereignty in this politics of relief. In doing this, the paper attempts to answer the following questions: Could the politicization of relief in this war have been avoided? Whose interest did the impasse serve in the war? To what extent did it affect the most vulnerable part of the population? What were the main positions and arguments of the parties involved and to what extent should each of the parties be held responsible? The author argues that the politicization of relief operations in the war was avoidable. What was more, it served the war

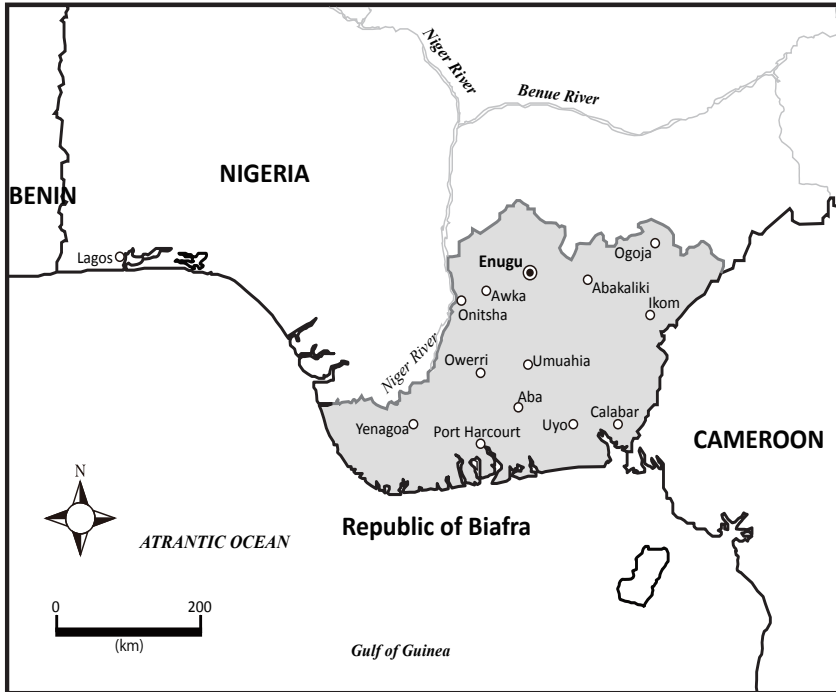


Fig. 1. Map of Biafra

strategy of the belligerents, and the women and children of Biafra were allowed to suffer the worst human catastrophe in the annals of Nigerian history. The study is based on primary sources that include oral information from the International Committees of the Red Cross (ICRC) officials, former Red Cross volunteers and ex-officials of the defunct Biafran nation. Similarly, ICRC annual reports, annual reports of the Nigerian Red Cross Society and relevant government agencies, newspaper reports, group discussion by some war survivors were used.

## PRELUDE TO LARGE-SCALE INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN OPERATION

Poor handling of the crises arising from the two preceding coup d'états by the Federal Government of Nigeria led by Lt.-Col. Yakubu Gowon was one of the causes of the Biafran secession. The mediation in the peace talks that followed the crises in Aburi, Ghana on 4 and 5 January 1967 by the Ghanaian Head of State, General Joseph Ankrah culminated in the Aburi Accord.<sup>(1)</sup> However, the hope for peace was dashed when Col. Yakubu Gowon reneged and instead, in an attempt to counter possible secession plans by Col. Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, proceeded with the unilateral splitting of the Eastern Region into three

states on 27 May 1967. Three days later, on 30 May 1967, Col. Ojukwu, in consultation with the Eastern Nigerian Constituent Assembly, announced the secession of the Eastern Region as a sovereign state to be known as the Republic of Biafra (See/Live/Love Nigeria Website, 2012). The failure of Lt.-Col. Yakubu Gowon to abide by the decision unanimously reached at Aburi was considered a demonstration of his bad faith, inconsistency and lack of realism (Uzoigwe, 2011). A little over a month later, on 6 July 1967, the Nigerian Civil War broke out between Nigeria and the secessionist Biafra.

Casualties within the first few months of hostilities were manageable, as none of the belligerent camps was able to rally sufficient military strength to force a quick and decisive settlement. In fact the war went into a stalemate due to stiff resistance by the Biafra forces who defeated the Nigerian troops in such Biafran territories as Abagana, Arochukwu, Oguta, Umuahia, Onne, and Ikot Ekpene. As the war progressed, however, Biafra was defensive especially after the fall of some of these strategic areas and the subsequent months of advances by the Nigerian FMG troops. With the fall of Bonny Island early in the war, and the capture of Port Harcourt by the federal troops on 21 May 1968, Biafra became landlocked and contact with the outside world was solely by air (Gribbin, 1973: 49). The blockade of the Eastern Region by the FMG marked the beginning of a serious humanitarian crisis and the beginning of the triangular politics involving the humanitarian organizations, led by the ICRC, the FMG of Nigeria, and the Biafran authorities.

## THE BEGINNING OF INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN OPERATION

Prior to the outbreak of hostilities and large-scale international relief operations, there were relief operations by the Nigerian Red Cross following the pervading sporadic conflicts arising from the coup d'état of 15 January 1966 and its counter-coup of July 1966 which internally displaced people. More relief operations were organized by the Nigerian Red Cross and the National Red Cross of Dahomey for the Nigerian refugees in Dahomey, present day Republic of Benin, who fled the first military takeover of government and the subsequent insecurity that it generated. It was reported that about 2,200 Nigerians fled to the neighboring Dahomey (*Daily Times*, 30 January 1966). Some of these refugees fled as a result of rumors of attacks as well as repeated threats from their neighbors and landlords.<sup>(2)</sup> The refugees, after repeated assurances from the Nigerian authorities of their safety, were convinced that the situation was conducive for their return. They were aided back home after the modalities and talks leading to their final return were finalized by the two Red Cross Societies. In these operations, the armed forces of both countries were mobilized, together with their logistical support, in the repatriation exercise from the Nigerian-Dahomey border to Ibadan and further down to other areas in the Western Region (Mohammed, 1989). By the end of February 1966, with the collaboration of the National Red Cross Societies of both countries, within a week of the commencement of the operation, over 2,300 refugees were successfully repatriated (Relief Action Report, 1966).

A large-scale international relief operation in the Nigerian Civil War was delayed mostly for two reasons; firstly, neither of the belligerents was able to make significant advances against the other early in the war to create a humanitarian crisis on a scale larger than the National Red Cross Societies could manage (Davis, 1972). In fact, the Biafrans held their positions against the military might of the FMG of Nigeria. This was partly due to supply build-ups by the Biafrans prior to the commencement of actual hostilities and smuggling across the border during the initial months of conflict, which postponed Biafra's eventual hardships (Davis, 1975). Secondly, any request for international relief by either side at that time perhaps was avoided as it would have suggested its strategic and logistic weakness, and neither wanted to advance undue psychological advantage to the other. However, this did not keep the relief agencies inactive. In fact, some of the relief organizations such as the World Council of Churches and Caritas Internationalis had issued appeals for relief support as early as November 1967 (Peat Report, Appendix V, cited in Davis, 1975). Three months later, in February 1968, ICRC made an attempt to launch an appeal for aid for the civilian population, but had to suspend the plan on account of its inability to obtain permission from the belligerents on the modalities of shipping supplies into Biafra where no agreement had been concluded (Davis, 1975). Despite these early difficulties, the organization was still able to negotiate a cease-fire agreement between the belligerents to allow for a plane loaded with seven tons of medical supplies worth 150,000 Swiss francs and a medical team consisting of three surgeons and an anesthetist to enter the Biafran territory on 18 and 19 November 1967 (Wiseberg, 1973). To ensure this, the ICRC had to arrange for a chartered plane from Basel to Lagos before proceeding to Fernando Po to get clearance from the Biafran authorities before flying to Port Harcourt, since Biafra would not accept any direct flight from Lagos (ICRC, 1967). The agreement mostly allowed for night flights. These efforts were however insignificant compared to the level of humanitarian crisis resulting from the FMG's strategy of military and economic blockade after its heavy offensive against Biafra from April to June 1968 which closed the ring around the Biafrans.

When relief operations finally intensified, several relief agencies on the ground, both religious and secular, including the ICRC, were saddled with the responsibility of handling the situation: Oxfam, Africa Concern, Catholic Relief Services, Caritas Internationalis, Quaker-Service-Nigeria, and others under the umbrella of Joint Church Aid (JCA), an amalgam of Catholic and Protestant Church groups (Davis, 1975). Nearly all were nongovernmental and private, primarily financed through international sources. The overall coordination of the relief operation was assumed by the ICRC after a National Relief Advisory Committee of Voluntary Agencies (NARCVA) was set up to encompass all the voluntary and religious bodies involved in the relief operations later in 1968 (Mohammed, 1989). The involvement of some of the relief agencies and organizations in the Nigerian Civil War was purely humanitarian. 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. Indeed, it has been argued that the involvement of the ICRC in this war was the heaviest burden it committed itself to since

the Second World War, and for the first time it became involved so directly in relief distribution (Wiseberg, 1975). ICRC officials also confirmed the enormity of this task in several fora (*New Nigerian*, 19 August, 1968), and at times in joint statements with other relief organizations. Also as the Peat Report correctly admitted, "This was the first occasion that the ICRC had undertaken so large an operation of this type which went considerably beyond its traditional activities" (Peat Report, cited in Davis, 1975: 505)

It should be noted that Nigeria ratified the Geneva Conventions after her independence in 1960. By implication, the country adhered to the basic foundations of international humanitarian law and, by extension, subscribed to the mandate of the ICRC. Article 3 common to the four Geneva Conventions, in itself a mini-convention,<sup>(3)</sup> gives the ICRC the authority to offer its services to help the victims of internal armed conflicts (Inter-parliamentary Union and ICRC, 1999: 13). It is on this basis that ICRC works in numerous countries where internal armed conflicts occur (Blondel, 1987).

#### THE BEGINNING OF THE POLITICIZATION OF THE RELIEF OPERATION

As noted above, the blockade imposed by the Nigerian government against Biafra hindered the flow of supplies and personnel into the Biafran territory. Consequently, 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 (*New Nigerian*, 4 July 1968; 23 July 1968; 13 July 1968; *Daily Times*, 24 July 1968). However, the effort especially of its chair at the time, H. I. M. Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia, did not yield much fruit (Niven, 1970). Similar efforts by Pope Paul VI who appealed to the parties for negotiations did not change the belligerents' hard stance so that only night flights remained workable (ICRC, 1968). The quagmire created by this blockade was caused by a couple of factors. First was the exploitation by the FMG of Nigeria of what appeared to be a boast to its war strategy, namely, its insistence under 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 (ICRC, 1971), 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. From the provision of this article, the ICRC had the right to send relief to the Biafran territory, but it must, however, negotiate an agreement with the FMG of Nigeria. At this period, and under this provision, the Biafran territory was still regarded as the territory of the Federal Republic of

Nigeria, since Biafra was not widely recognized by the international community.<sup>(4)</sup> This situation therefore left with Nigeria the sovereignty and the right conferred by the above provision.

Another factor was the insistence of the Biafran authorities not to accept any cargo of supplies that had been inspected in Lagos in line with the condition specified by the Nigerian authorities (Wiseberg, 1973). 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.<sup>(5)</sup>

During this period, while the FMG insisted on its right under Article 23, on the other hand, it never challenged the right of the Biafrans to receive relief under the same article. This was the reason some scholars viewed this stance of the FMG as "probably the first modern instance in which a blockading power did not dispute the applicability of Article 23 to a civil war" (Wiseberg, 1975: 120). Others believed that the gesture had some considerable propaganda value which served the objective of the FMG (*West Africa*, 3 February 1968), as demonstrated in a Radio Lagos broadcast on 22 November 1967 (*African Research Bulletin*, 1967). This gesture was not sustained as the subsequent attempt by the ICRC to initiate further relief supplies failed. Indeed, when the ICRC became aware of the magnitude of the need in the war zones and commenced negotiations, it was too obvious that the circumstances that led to the success of the first agreement with the belligerents had changed. With the modalities of relief politicized, the Nigerian government insisted on its right to inspect all cargo scheduled for the Biafran enclave. On 16 January 1968, ICRC had scheduled a flight conveying emergency supplies, including a medical team of ten, to both Biafran as well as the Federal held territories (*African Report*, 1968). The flight was cancelled after the FMG withdrew its permission for an over flight of the Nigerian territory, and by extension, all over flights and landings on the Biafran territory still considered part of Nigeria (*The Guardian*, 16 January 1968) for what it considered as military security (ICRC 1968). As the airlift became the only means of getting food into Biafra, the Nigerian authorities wanted the night flights replaced by day time flights to prevent the Biafrans from bringing in arms and ammunition under the cover of the night (Cervenka, 1971).

The Biafrans on the other hand continued the rejection of all relief inspected and monitored by Lagos. The Biafran authorities feared possible sabotage or food poisoning by the Nigerian authorities in Lagos (Cervenka, 1971). This fear was also alluded to by the statement of Dr. Clarence Clyde Ferguson, Jr., the US Special Coordinator on Relief to the civilian victims of the Nigerian Civil War (Adegbite, n.d.). Earlier, the agreement over the opening of sea and river corridors to Biafra was inconclusive because each of the belligerents proposed corridors it could control effectively.

This hard stance of the belligerents worsened the already bad situation occasioned by the blockade, even more with the influx of more internally displaced persons. While these politics dragged on, hunger and starvation took hold of the



Biafran population. The first to be affected were women and children. An estimated 106 children died from *Kwashiorkor* in Agbala village in the Owerri province alone.<sup>(6)</sup> In the adjoining villages such as Mkpehi, Emii, Umunam, and Emeabiam, people fed on rodents and lizards, and even on corpses of Nigerian soldiers both due to hunger and anger.<sup>(7)</sup> Some of the humanitarian supplies brought in by Caritas and other faith-based humanitarian agencies could not even get to the victims, as these were taken over by the Biafran soldiers. Consequently, with supply lines cut, many Biafrans slowly starved to death (Jacobs, 1987; *New York Times*, 1 August 1987) Many children succumbed to diseases such as *kwashiorkor*.<sup>(8)</sup> Eyewitness accounts in Egbu, Awaka, Agbala and Emekuku communities described the horrific experience of some of the women in the area. In Ezeogba, one of the villages of Emekuku, the level of hunger and starvation was such that the seed yams, mostly kept for planting, became the only source of food together with cassava leaves.<sup>(9)</sup> The women had to trek as far as 100 kilometers to Mbaise through bush paths to gather nuts and bush berry, only to hand them over at gunpoint to hungry Biafran soldiers who threatened rape and murder.<sup>(10)</sup> In one such expedition, one of the nursing mothers had to abandon her baby to escape Nigerian soldiers who started to shoot when they heard the baby crying. Instances of abandoned babies in the bush abound. One such abandoned baby from Ezeogba village, Emekuku in Owerri, Imo state, now married with children, in a group discussion narrated how difficult life had been in his foster home where his relatives always reminded him that he was picked up by their grandmother during the war, in other words, he could not share in their family inheritance.<sup>(11)</sup> The women suffered at the hands of the FMG troops. In one instance, the troops marauded Agbala village, killing any adult male, especially those perceived as Biafran soldiers, in the presence of their mothers, sisters, wives or even daughters.<sup>(12)</sup> The Nigerian soldiers also hunted down any livestock, forced the women who themselves were hungry to cook, and after eating as the women and children watched, raped them.<sup>(13)</sup> In Awaka and Egbu communities, the starvation and malnutrition among the children was so much that the Anglican Mission in Egbu, itself looted, urged the people to feed the children with green leaves, with especially the succulent cocoa yam and scent leaves. These leaves often were cooked, but at other times, squeezed and the extracted green fluid given to the *kwashiorkor* infested children three times daily. Even these leaves became scarce.<sup>(14)</sup> One account painted a gruesome picture at the Ikot Ekpene Prison where people were dehumanized: “men, women and children, lying, sitting or squatting among the dead, with they themselves completely reduced to skeletons and suffering from *kwashiorkor*” (Madiebo, 1980). In an article in the *Sunday Times* of London on 8 August 1968, William Norris declared:

I have seen things in Biafra this week which no man should have to see. Sights to scorch the mind and sicken the conscience. I have seen children roasted alive, young girls torn in two by shrapnel, pregnant women eviscerated, and old men blown to fragments...by federal Nigeria dropping their bombs on civilian centres throughout Biafra.<sup>(15)</sup>



While the suffering and death of the Biafran population, including children, as a result of this politics was never in doubt, there are conflicting figures on the total number of deaths in the war. Reporting to Parliament on Lord Hunt's mission, Commonwealth Secretary, George Thomson, stated that:

The Biafran starvation death rate was 200 to 300 per day, on the same day, July 22; the Washington Post reported that official Biafran sources set the number of death at approximately 3% of its population per week. The announcement was unclear as to whether the figure 3% was to be applied to the whole population of 12 million or only the refugee population of 4.6 million (Colwell, 1968: 26).

While UNICEF put the number at over two million children (Tamuno, 1989: 65), the ICRC projected that there were between 8,000 to 10,000 deaths each day in the Biafran enclave towards the end of 1968. This claim was also validated by Dr. Clyde Shepherd in his statement to the External Affairs and National Defence Committee of the Canadian House of Commons in October 1968:

The figures we have produced are obtained from random samples of death rates in villages, refugee camps and hospitals from every province in Biafra. By the end of July, 6,000 deaths a day from malnutrition or starvation was arrived at. Recently, last month the Red Cross published a figure of 8,000 to 10,000 deaths. Knowing how this figure was reached, I would agree with it as being reasonably accurate (Shepherd, 1968: 85).<sup>(16)</sup>

While these figures were still contested, the humanitarian situation continued to deteriorate. In fact, the dire need for relief supplies in Biafra, engendered high-scale corruption in the Biafran society (Nwankwo, 1972). Thus one's closeness to a Biafran government official or senior Biafran military officer guaranteed enough ration for one's family (Nwoko, 2010). Women who had no other source of help, since their men were killed in battle or declared missing, were exploited sexually before they could be allotted rations for their children (Wiseberg, 1973). Some others were forced to send their girls as young as eight years old to senior Biafran officers or worse still forced into marriage to the Nigerian soldiers.<sup>(17)</sup> This even extended to military conscription, especially after the fall of Enugu to the FMG troops. Since closeness to a high government official or military officer could save one's relations from being conscripted into the army, or better, placed in civilian "essential duties," most of the women particularly yielded to the sexual request of the corrupt officials to save the lives of their children, husbands or male relatives (Wiseberg, 1973). The availability of supplies in the hands of senior Biafran officials could perhaps also suggest hoarding of such by the Biafran authorities to increase the incidence of starvation and death of their own population in order to validate their propaganda claims of the use of hunger and starvation by the Nigerian government as a war strategy.

Indeed, one successful strategy of Biafra was the efficient employment of their propaganda machine. According to Osaghae (1998), the effectiveness of the Biaf-

ran propaganda was coordinated by the Biafran Directorate of Propaganda headed by Uche Chukwumeriji as well as its external machinery; the Geneva based Mark Press (Osaghae, 1998). In February 1968, the Biafran authorities recruited Mark Press News Feature Service (1969a) to distribute publications sent from Biafra to press outlets throughout Europe and North America for the duration of the war (Willms, 2011). Mark Press, a public relations firm established by an American, A. H. William Bernhardt, became synonymous with Biafran propaganda. According to *The Times*, the firm:

...literarily waged Biafran War in press releases with more than 250 press releases. They are crammed with news of impending arms deliveries that is designed to embarrass European governments and with stark warnings about starvations. The firm has arranged air passages into Biafra for more than 70 newsmen from every West European nation and transmitted eyewitness reports to their publications (*The Times Friday*, 23 August 1968).

Apart from circulating newsletters, photographs, documents including transcriptions of numerous addresses by Biafran leader, Lt.-Col. Ojukwu, and other communications from the Biafran authorities, Mark Press promoted publications from Biafran sympathizers, especially those that articulated the “Biafran philosophy”<sup>(18)</sup> which were officially endorsed by the government of Biafra. One such publication was Samuel Ifejika and Arthur Nwankwo’s *Biafra: The Making of a Nation* (1969). The excellent publicity given to the plight of Biafra in the Western world by Mark Press through photographs of starving children as well as destroyed cities and towns, effectively swayed much of the world’s sympathy on the Biafran side (Nwadike, 2011). In fact, the synergy between the Biafran Directorate of Propaganda and Mark Press forced three of Nigeria’s arms suppliers, the Netherlands, Belgium and Czechoslovakia to stop further shipment to Nigeria (*The Times Friday*, 23 August 1968). Also photographs of alleged brutality by Nigerian soldiers against Biafran civilians were often provided by Mark Press News Feature Service.<sup>(19)</sup> At the same time, the Biafran leadership appealed to the sensibilities of the western world, and promoted Biafra as the leading light in black Africa, familiar with Western-oriented education and ideals. In some of his speeches, Ojukwu asserted that: “Where there was backwardness we brought progress. And where there was ignorance we brought them education” (Ojukwu, 1969b: 3). He invoked the tool of education which of course was meant to appeal to the West as his instrument for bringing about this transformation (Ifejika & Nwankwo, 1969), as against his alleged military dictatorship of Nigeria, represented by the Muslim North which resisted accepting the modern skills and knowledge associated with Western-oriented education (Willms 2011). Ojukwu claimed that “Northern Nigeria had a different idea about fellowship; theirs, according to their religion, was that of slave and master – no more.” (Ojukwu, 1969a: 37). He often touted the western ideals such as democratic rule and the rule of law to argue for the ideal state which Biafra represented (Mark Press News Feature Service, 1969a).

The most sensitive angle to the propaganda was the religious interpretation given to the war by Biafra and her propaganda agencies, which portrayed the war as a

pogrom against the Christian Igbo by the Muslim north represented by FMG, using hunger and starvation as a weapon. Thus, images of dying and dehydrated children were effectively employed by the Biafran authorities in securing international attention. For example, in Italy with many strong pro-Biafra sympathizers, the Biafran authorities cashed in on this through a protest letter to Pope Paul VI and the prime minister of Italy to halt the sale of arms by “Catholic Italy to Muslim Northern Nigeria” to be used in killing the Catholic Igbos of Eastern Nigeria (Osaghae, 1998: 66). The Nigerian Head of State at the time General Yakubu Gowon was a Christian,<sup>(20)</sup> yet this religious propaganda gained ground in some parts of the West. Although Biafra’s religious propaganda was refuted by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria,<sup>(21)</sup> its effect nonetheless was profound, as international opinions were further politicized. Consequently, the governments of some African, European and Scandinavian countries that included the Vatican and the United States, out of sympathy for the plight of the women and children, mobilized support for the humanitarian operation. Gabon for instance established a Biafran Village in Libreville where sick and malnourished Biafran children were evacuated to by some international relief agencies, in particular Caritas Internationalis (Tamuno, 1989). While the Nigerian media was awash with allegations of the Vatican’s support for Biafra in the Nigerian Media, the position of the Vatican especially Pope Paul VI’s involvement, was swiftly defended by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria. These allegations as well as several protests to Rome, in particular, the protest by Archbishop Aggey and two other Nigerian bishops in December 1968 to Pope Paul VI about the purported involvement of the Catholic Church in the Nigerian Civil War (*New York Post*, 2 December 1968), prompted the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria to issue a communiqué:

We reject the suggestion that Pope Paul VI is involved in this war, directly or indirectly, in any capacity except that of bringing peace and reconciliation. His personal efforts for peace are well known. Equally well known is the Holy Father’s concern for the poor and suffering. Wherever they may be, he sends help to them through Caritas Internationalis because this is an organization dedicated exclusively to bringing aid to victims of war, famine and disaster (Schineller, 2002: 53).

In 1962, even before his ascension to the papacy, “Pope Paul VI was the first European cardinal to visit Nigeria and was moved by the intensity of the faith and the spontaneity of devotion of African Catholics” (Sundkler & Steed, 2000: 953). This perhaps explains his interest in Nigeria. Although the international Christian response later in the war was concentrated on the provision of relief and humanitarian aid to Biafra, its initial response was concerned with attempts at peaceful mediation (Sundkler & Steed, 2000). Pope Paul VI was therefore committed to ending the suffering caused by the war, hence his several appeals for negotiations and peace. For example on 31 July 1969 after attending the all-African Bishops’ Conference in Uganda, Pope Paul VI pressed for a settlement between the belligerents in the war having met with them, and further promised to extend his stay if a time for meeting in Rome could be agreed. He drew concessions

from the Biafran authorities to at least accept something less than sovereignty, while the Nigerian side disclosed that a confederation may well be necessary in order to save the country (*New York Times*, 5 August, 1969). The Nigerian authorities later disclosed their preference for the Organization of African Unity in the mediation talks than by individuals such as Pope Paul VI (Yancho, 2005). However, the effort of Pope Paul VI in getting the belligerents to the round table was hailed by many as a success.

The issue of evacuating malnourished children in itself was also a subject of debate amongst the relief agencies due to its implications. On the positive side, some argued that this saved the lives of many children who otherwise would have died. But many mothers lost their children because these children's identities could not be certified. This aside the loss of their husbands was traumatic (Nwoko, 2010). This latter sentiment was shared by most of the child welfare organizations. One such organization, the Swiss-based International Union for Child Welfare (IUCW) was vehemently opposed to evacuating children from the Biafran Enclave (Joint Church Aid, 1968). Its Secretary General, Pierre Zumbach recalling his earlier experience, noted that:

In the Congo, certain children shifted from one province to another with no accompanying person from their ethnical [sic] group have since lost all trace of their families. A number of these children are now vagrants in Kinshasa.<sup>(22)</sup>

The suffering of the Biafran population, as a result of the politicization of relief operations, mobilized most of the relief agencies into employing unconventional means to get supplies into the Biafran enclave. The Nigerian authorities perceived this development in smuggling of supplies as illegal and subversive, and an affront to its sovereignty by some of the relief agencies.

## THE HUMANITARIANS AND THE POLITICS OF RELIEF

In April 1968, the FMG promulgated a decree establishing the National Commission for Rehabilitation, and also confirmed the ICRC as coordinator of relief operations. From then on, the relief comprised two arms: the National Commission for Rehabilitation on the side of the FMG, and the National Relief Advisory Committee of Voluntary Agencies (NARCVA), which was an amalgam of all the voluntary and religious organizations involved in the relief operation. The Commission, with an initial finance of £1m (Niven, 1970), had the duty of ensuring compliance with the federal government policies on relief and rehabilitation services in the war affected area of the country. The NARCVA was headed by the ICRC from 1968 to the second half of 1969 (Mohammed, 1989). Consequently, the ICRC headquarters in Geneva through its Head of Mission in Lagos took charge of the planning, finance and administration of Joint Relief Action. This action was perhaps aimed at streamlining the relief operations in the war and halting illegal supplies to the Biafrans by some relief agencies. More than 20,000 tons of food and medical supplies were flown into the Biafran territory from 8

April 1968 to June 1969 by flights organized by the ICRC (ICRC, 1969). The supplies were distributed to the ten principal distribution centers each directed by a team that comprised a manager in charge, an administrator, a transport specialist and a nutritionist (ICRC, 1969). On 18 and 30 April 1968, the ICRC appealed to the national societies on behalf of the victims of the conflict in response to the overwhelming increase in the number of displaced persons amidst the rising death rate and at the request of the Nigerian Red Cross (ICRC, 1968). Following the capture of Port Harcourt by the FMG on 21 May 1968, the ICRC launched "SOS Biafra" two days later, requesting the national societies to intervene with their respective governments. The appeal also went to the public in the hopes to enable the humanitarian agencies gather the necessary wherewithal to rescue some 60,000 displaced persons in Biafra (ICRC, 1968). The magnitude of the humanitarian situation led the ICRC on 17 July 1968 to appoint Dr. August R. Lindt as Commissioner General to direct and coordinate the relief operations. Lindt was former United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and one time delegate of the ICRC (ICRC, 1968). To facilitate easy movement of materials between Lagos and distribution points in the hinterland of the country, the ICRC deployed multiple cargo transport by December 1968. These included two vessels each with a capacity of 535 tons and another of 1,500 tons (the latter offered by the Netherlands Red Cross and government), two aircraft, three helicopters (supplied by UNICEF) and nearly 300 vehicles, that included quite a number of lorries (ICRC, 1968). In all, a total of 20,500 tons of relief stock was gathered in the federally held area, enough to take care of about 800,000 people (ICRC, 1968).

While the displacement of people worsened with the advancement of FMG troops, the ICRC had to devise a more functional measure of handling the complex situation. Consequently, it decided to mount a coordinated effort called Operation International Airlift West Africa (INALWA). This comprised efforts of the National Red Cross Societies, UNICEF, the World Council of Churches, Catholic Relief and the International Union for Child Welfare. The operation commenced upon agreement with the Biafran authorities for the neutralization of the land strip at Obilagu for purpose of the civilian relief operations (ICRC, 1968). Similarly, on 25 August, the Spanish government allowed the use of the airfield at Santa Isabel for airlifts. But more significantly, agreement was reached between ICRC's Dr. Lindt and the FMG on 3 September to allow day flights, between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m., for a period of ten days from Santa Isabel in Fernando Po to the airfield at Uli in Biafra (*Daily Times*, 4 September 1968). While the ICRC was very much ready to commence the operation with six available aircraft that included five DC6 and a C130 Hercules, the INALWA Operation suffered a setback because the Biafran authorities rejected the day flight operation (*Daily Times*, 5 September 1968). It feared a supposed military advantage to the FMG and instead proposed using the Obilagu airstrip (ICRC, 1968). In the face of deadlock between the belligerents on this issue, the ICRC had to continue the night operations, conveying relief from Fernando Po to both Uli and Obilagu until the latter was captured by the FMG. From 3 September, when the operation was mounted, to December 1968, 6,404 tons of relief was conveyed by means of 675 air flights into Biafra (ICRC, 1968). Despite the challenges faced by this operation, which included its interrup-

tion from Santa Isabel due to the independence of Equatorial Guinea from Spain, the operation continued from 23 December 1968 into 1969 after Dr. Lindt took the helm. Indeed, by the end of 1968, an estimated 3,500,000 people were still in need of relief assistance, although about 850,000 women and children were catered for by the concerted efforts of the ICRC and other aid organizations that constituted the Joint Church Aid (ICRC, 1968).

## CHARGES OF IMPARTIALITY AGAINST THE HUMANITARIANS

Just as the momentum of the war intensified from the beginning of 1969, so also did the humanitarian emergency. This necessitated a review of the relief operations and strategies by the agencies involved. While the ICRC as the coordinator of relief activities made some restructuring of its personnel (ICRC, 1969), these were aimed at enhancing good relations with the authorities in Nigeria as well as between the INALWA operation division and the Equatorial Guinea government (ICRC, 1969), following the continuous disruption of flight operations by Equatorial Guinea. Consequently, the agencies led by ICRC found a new operational base for the relief operations into the Biafran territory at Cotonou, after consultations with the authorities of the Republic of Dahomey on 28 January 1969 (ICRC, 1969). While this arrangement was agreed to by the Nigerian authorities declaring their preparedness to control consignments in Cotonou, they however warned that night flights were at the risk and peril of the operators (ICRC, 1969). From this period onward, except for the temporary disruption of operations between 28 February and 12 March 1969 as a result of events at Rio Muni, the ICRC had access to two operational bases because the authorities of Equatorial Guinea allowed the ICRC to resume flights from Santa Isabel airport following the interventions of the Secretary General of the United Nation, U Thant (ICRC, 1969).

Despite the humanitarian agencies' commitment to the relief operations, the events of the subsequent months proved highly challenging to the Swiss-based ICRC and other humanitarian agencies involved in the operation. The FMG questioned whether the ICRC was an impartial and neutral body as well as the integrity of the humanitarian operations. Some of the actions of the ICRC and utterances of its personnel were given sundry interpretations by the Nigerian government officials who believed that the organization along with the other faith-based agencies had some sympathy for Biafra. Reports were ripe both in the local and international press that the relief agencies in the Nigerian crisis were financing the supply of arms and ammunition to Biafra, among other accusations (*New Nigerian*, 29 July 1968). Consequently, there were demands by some government officials and other national bodies to the FMG for the prompt ban of the activities of relief organizations, in particular the ICRC. One such demand was made by the North Central State Commissioner for Information, Malam Sani Zango, and published in a newspaper (*New Nigerian*, 24 August 1968). Similar demands were made in international media by Nigerian officials,<sup>(23)</sup> even directly accusing the ICRC of secret involvement, as explicit as the one below titled, "Partners in Crime":



For some time now the International Committee of the Red Cross has proved beyond doubts that it is in Nigeria for reasons other than humanitarian. The organisation has so sided with the rebels that it has now assumed the role of an agent of the secessionists.... The fact is that the rebels and these mischief making organisations are nothing but partners in crime. The role of the International Red Cross in the Nigerian crisis has clearly demonstrated that it is doing nothing other than aiding the secessionists to sustain their rebellion...without the cooperation of the Red Cross in solving their foreign exchange and other financial problem the rebels would not have remained so stubborn and unrepentant (Kirk-Green, 1971: 82).

Further, prominent actors in the war such as Olusegun Obasanjo (who later became Nigeria's two time head of state) even accused the governments of Portugal, France, Spain and some Scandinavian countries of secretly sustaining the rebellion through their humanitarian and material supports and by encouraging their citizens to make huge contributions to save Biafra and Biafran babies (Obasanjo, 1980).

Tension between the Nigerian authorities and the international humanitarian agencies on the issue of neutrality and objectivity in international relief operations were insurmountable. In particular, two International Red Cross workers were killed by stray bullets according to reports (*Daily Times*, 3 October, 1968), during the battle for the control of Okigwe town in the Biafran territory. The workers were Dr. Drajnn Hercoj, a medical expert from Belgrade and a member of the only Yugoslav relief team in Nigeria, and Franx George Carrison, a Swede (*Daily Times*, 5 October 1968). On 27 May 1969, Dr. Lindt and two other officials of the ICRC were detained by the Lagos Airport Authorities (ICRC, 1969).

The tension reached a climax on 5 June 1969, when a Nigerian fighter plane shot down an ICRC aircraft clearly marked with the Red Cross emblem flown by a Swedish pilot, with food supply to Biafra (ICRC, 1969). Although it was argued that the plane probably was shot down in retaliation for Count von Rosen's bombings of federal installations (de St. Jorre, 1972), it would appear, however, that the FMG shot down the aircraft due to her suspicion of the nature of cargo of the aircraft to Uli (Mohammed, 1989). The next day, the FMG ordered the withdrawal of the ICRC personnel working at Lagos Airport within three days. Eight days later on 14 June, Dr. Lindt was declared a *persona non grata* by the FMG (Mohammed, 1989), forcing him to tender his resignation to the ICRC on 19 June 1969. A day later, a Swedish relief post operating under the control and responsibility of the ICRC was looted and destroyed. The allegations of misconduct by the humanitarian agencies worsened when the ICRC in June 1969 condemned the FMG of Nigeria for changing its attitude towards the organization. The culmination of the whole episode was the final announcement on 30 June by the FMG banning the ICRC from handling and coordinating relief actions in Nigeria and subsequently, handing over the responsibility to the National Commission for Rehabilitation (Mohammed, 1989).



## CONCLUSION

Just as Colonel R.E. Scott, the Defence Adviser to the British High Commission in Lagos during the Nigerian Civil War in his report envisaged, the biggest and the best-equipped battalions won the war in the end (*Sunday Telegraph*, 11 January 1970.), but at what expense? Obviously none of the camps expected the magnitude of human suffering that the politics of relief had generated. Nevertheless, while the two camps were drawing up strategies, just as in all wars, human life to them was a dispensable commodity. While it could be argued that the humanitarian efforts were conducted on both sides of the battle line, the fact remains that the politicization of relief served the interest of the Nigerian and Biafran authorities, with the civil population, especially the vulnerable women and children, as the casualties of the struggle for power. The blockade and the politicization of the relief operation starved Biafra of vital supplies and relief considered by Nigeria as sustaining Biafra's resistance. Starving Biafra of vital relief supplies therefore hastened Biafra's final collapse. On the other hand, the worldwide humanitarian mobilization and the sympathy for the Biafrans which the Biafran propaganda achieved from the prolonged man-made hunger and starvation in the enclave helped its long resistance to the military onslaught of the FMG of Nigeria as well as influenced its recognition by some of the African countries. This, however, achieved no more than humanitarian and moral support. Indeed, Biafra's refusal to accept food supplies from Lagos no matter the consequence could have been its own strategy to sustain the situation of hunger and starvation in its population. The effect of this strategy by the Biafran leadership, however, would appear as grossly miscalculated more so as it needed the airlift to transport arms into the Biafran enclave.

For some of the international humanitarian agencies, the triangular politics exposed their unprofessional conduct, although the concentration of efforts on the Biafran side was the most likely outcome in a situation that had elicited more sympathy for the civilian casualties from the humanitarian agencies and their donors and the international community, rather than maintaining professionalism. To this extent, some faith-based humanitarian organizations violated the principle of neutrality in international humanitarian operations, and thus gradually politicized their operations and made their actions appear sympathetic to secessionist Biafra. However, the effects of the highest form of deprivation, suffering, agony and death, was borne by the most vulnerable: the women and children of Biafra. While the rate of starvation and death figures resulting from the politicization of relief operation is still a subject of debate, there is no doubt that no matter the statistics the women and the children were traumatized: the children seeing their siblings and peers dying of starvation and diseases, and the mothers experiencing the death of their children or worst still losing their children to humanitarian agencies who took them away to Gabon and never returned them. There is no doubt that hunger, starvation and death are products of war. However, the politicization of relief operations in the war was an avoidable human catastrophe. The Nigerian blockade and the willful restriction of food to the civilians by the belligerents to achieve their war objectives could have been avoided, yet, the extent to which each could be held responsible for the human calamity of that war remain largely unquantifiable.

## NOTES

- (1) The Aburi Accord was a set of agreements reached in Aburi Ghana between the delegation of the FMG of Nigeria, led by Lt. Colonel Yakubu Gowon, and the Biafran Head of State and leader of the Biafran delegation, Lt. Colonel Chukwuemeka Odemegwu Ojukwu, in early January 1967 on the settlement of the conflict (Uzoigwe, 2011).
- (2) From the oral interview with Mazi Michael Kamalu, (81), Former refugee in Benin Republic and returnee from Lagos during the Nigerian Civil War, at his residence, Egbelu-Emeke Obibi-Ezena Imo State, 20 December 2008.
- (3) Article 3 is called a mini-convention because it contains rules that are applicable not only to international conflict but to internal conflict as well. It is also common to all the Geneva Conventions.
- (4) Biafra was later recognized by a few African states, in particular, Ivory Coast, Zimbabwe, and Gabon, and much later, by Haiti in Central America.
- (5) See/Live/Love Nigeria Website 2012. Biography of the late General Chukwuemeka Odumegwu-Ojukwu (Ikemba Nnewi) Online. <http://logbabytours.blogspot.com/2012/07/biography-of-late-general-chukwuemeka.html>. (Accessed 27 December, 2012)
- (6) From the oral interview with Madam Juliana Nwoko, (87+) widow during the Nigerian Civil War at her residence, Egbelu-Agbala Owerri Local Government Area of Imo State, 20 February 2012.
- (7) From the oral interview with Madam Juliana Nwoko, (87+) widow during the Nigerian Civil War at her residence, Egbelu-Agbala Owerri Local Government Area of Imo State, 20 February 2012.
- (8) Kwashiorkor is a severe condition of malnutrition in children caused by inadequate intake of protein common among poor countries in third World
- (9) Statement made by Mrs. Florence Onyenwe (68 years) in a group discussion at Ezeogba Emekuku, Owerri North Local Government Area, Imo state 2 June 2013.
- (10) Statement made by Madam Cecilia Iheanacho (72 years+) in a group discussion at Ezeogba Emekuku, Owerri North Local Government Area, Imo state 2 June 2013.
- (11) Statement made by Mr. Peter (Surname withheld, 44 years+) in a group discussion at Ezeogba, Emekuku, Owerri North Local Government Area, Imo state 2 June 2013.
- (12) From the oral interview: Madam Juliana Nwoko, 2012
- (13) Statement made by Madam Margaret Ukaonu (70 years) in a group discussion at Ezeogba Emekuku, Owerri North Local Government Area, Imo state 2 June 2013. The daughter, name withheld, of this witness was one of the victims.
- (14) Statement made by Mrs Maria (54 years+) in a group discussion in Awaka, Village Owerri North Local Government Area, Imo state 2 June 2013.
- (15) Statement by Lt. Col. C.O. Ojukwu at the Inaugural meeting of the Peace Negotiations of Nigeria (presented on his behalf by Professor Eni Njoku) at the Nigerian-Biafran Conflict Peace Conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 5–15 August 1968.
- (16) Dr. W.C. Shepherd, a medical missionary from 1956 to the period of the war, testifying before the Canadian House of Commons Committee in Minutes of Proceedings and Evidence, Standing Committee on External and National Defence: Canadian House of Commons first session-twenty-eight parliament, 1968, quoted in Wiseberg. (1973: 85)
- (17) One of this author's aunts was forced into marriage to a Nigerian soldier of northern extraction by this means.
- (18) This philosophy involves the view that Biafra has the right to exist based on non-violence, democracy and on the principle of live and let live. It believes that Biafra would assume the position of the most developed and civilised black African state in the world. Most of these ideals borrow from western ideologies, a war strategy to attract western sympathy.

- (19) Some of these Mark Press News Feature Service (1969b) included: “Nigerian Bomb Raid kills 300 Biafrans: 500 injured (7 February 1969),” “Bombing of Biafran civilians increases: 4 attacks in 2 days (26 March 1969),” and, “Over 1200 Biafran civilians have been killed or injured in 2 months of indiscriminate Nigerian bombings (2 May 1969).”
- (20) Federal Ministry of Information, Soldier of Honor (Lagos: Director, Printing Division), p. 1, accessed at Butenschon, Material Concerning the Nigeria-Biafra Conflict [microform], Reel 3 of 5.
- (21) “Statement by the Catholic Bishop Conference of Nigeria on the Nigerian Crisis” Cited in Peter Schineller (ed.) 2002. *The Voice of the Voiceless: Pastoral Letters and Communiqués of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria 1960–2002*. Daily Graphic, Ibadan, pp. 53–54.
- (22) This was a statement issued by the International Union for Child Welfare entitled ‘to save the children of Nigeria-Biafra’, 10 September 1968, quoted in Wiseberg, ‘The International Politics of Relief.’
- (23) BBC ME/2885/B2: quoted in A.H.M Kirk-Greene, 1971. *Crisis and conflicts in Nigeria: a documentary source book-1970. Vol. 2*. Oxford University Press, London.

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