

ASSESSMENT OF THE HUMANITARIAN ORGANIZATIONS' INTERVENTIONS IN THE NIGERIA CIVIL WAR: A FOCUS ON THE IGBO POPULATION

Igbo K. Nwokike. Ph.D.

Department of History and International Relations,
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria.
kenneth.nwokike@ebsu.edu.ng +2348035463488

Nnanyere C. Ogo, Ph.D.

Department of History and International Relations,
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria.

Ndubuisi M. Mbam, Ph.D.

Department of History and International Relations,
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki, Nigeria..

Abstract

Humanitarian Intervention by organizations in the Nigerian Civil War was premised on the moral principle and the need to alleviate suffering among the distressed population. However, these altruistic interventions were, challenging and capable of negative and unintended results. This paper investigates the activities and roles of several humanitarian organizations that were in charge of relief operations in those areas ravaged by famine during the Nigerian Civil War. It will show that some of the humanitarian interventions were altruistic, contentious challenging and capable of negative and unintended consequences. Attempts have been made by humanitarian bodies to influence the behaviour of Biafran leadership through psychological and material support. The paper will look at legitimacy of humanitarian intervention. It will show that relief aid gave the regime legitimacy and thus strengthened it. The direct dealings of the United States with the secessionists in the area of humanitarian assistance were a very big boost. This work will also look at challenges and controversies surrounding the activities of World Council of Churches, the Red Cross, Holy Ghost Fathers, Cantos International, the Vatican etc.

Keywords: Humanitarian, Civil-war, Famine, Secession

Introduction

Adam Roberts define Humanitarian Intervention as military intervention in a state without the approval of its authorities, and with the purpose of preventing wide spread sufferings or death among the inhabitants.¹ although the concept of humanitarian intervention is vaguely defined and elusively broad. Roberts's definition refers to three of his essential characteristics which are at least in principle subject to a general consensus. First humanitarian intervention is armed because the employment of military force is its central feature. Second, it is an intervention because it entails sending military forces across the state borders without giving the state concerned an opportunity to object to this action. Third, the intervention is humanitarian because it is directed to prevent massive violations of human rights and humanitarian law in the state concerned.

Humanitarian Efforts in Biafra Camp

Humanitarian Intervention in Biafra can be said to be legitimate based on Thomas Aquinas doctrine of just war. The idea of legitimacy is multidisciplinary concept encompassing moral, philosophical political as well legal principle. Legitimacy is always a matter of assessment. The problem arises when legality and legitimacy come into conflict. Legitimacy is an inherently subjective concept so agreement is not always possible in what is legitimate and illegitimate. It is the circumstances not the concept that determines the quality of a particular action.

It is forty-one years since the independent State of Biafra collapsed ending one of the most audacious and activist leadership roles ever played by International and ecumenical churches.

The dimension of starvation in Nigerian Civil War is far greater than ordinary famine in underdeveloped areas. The mass deaths, that occurred in the war was the result of partly political and military factors that prevented the distribution even of food which were presently available.

In September 1968, International Committee of Red Cross reported that 8 -10,000 people were starving to death each day as a result of this war and that the situation was rapidly deteriorating.²

On October 31, 1968, a relief worker for the world council of churches reported that 25,000 people would die each day if war continued for another month. It means that if the present situation is allowed to continued, 60,000 people would have died by next summer.³

The Biafran case demonstrates the paralysis of existing International Institutions when it comes to mobilizing effective and swift relief.

Until recently, the conflict has commanded little public attention despite the fact that was already responsible for more deaths than has occurred in Vietnam and is causing the death of thousands of people each day through starvation. Mobilization of public opinion in past has been impeded by lack of readily available information about the details of conflict and its background. Much of the information deriving from Nigeria is contradictory and incomplete and access to objective first-hand sources is difficult. Most people lack adequate information on the causes of the war.

One of the greatest ironies caused by the Biafra war was the famine which inevitably occurred in Biafra, leading to the death of more than one million people due to starvation⁴. This was mainly caused by the fact that food was used as a weapon of war during the war. Nigerian military government-imposed blockades around Biafra effectively cutting off the secessionist states food supply with the hope of forcing them to raise a white flag.

The *Joint church aid*/ The Jesus Christ Airline Officially as it was called *Joint church aid* but pilots called it Jesus Airline. For nearly two years, The *Joint church aid* kept Biafran State alive, refusing to allow starvation to be used as weapon of war. It flew 5,314 extremely dangerous missions, carrying 60,000 tons of humanitarian aid that saved millions of lives.⁵

These daredevil pilots flew at night from the Island of Sao Tome into a tiny airstrip carried from the dense bush without lights, skimming blind over the trees at 2,000 feet to avoid the attacks of the enemy. At its peak, *Uli* airstrip won the busiest in Africa, handling up to 50 flights a night and each flight broke some international law.⁶

Each of the planes had the logo of *Joint church aid* - two fishes, one of the earliest symbols of

Christianity but each had its own name. The best known was *Canair relief* whose four super cronies were an integral part of JCA but there was also *Norchurchaid* from Europe and Holy ghost Airline run by the Irish Catholic Holy Ghost Fathers. This relief effort was all put together by a bunch of church people and humanitarian who refused to be bound by old mission, old diplomacy, old colonialism, the power of big oil and the secrecy of murderous bush wars.⁷

On January 12, 1970, the military head of state, General Odumegwu Ojukwu flew out of *Uli* on the last relief flight *Canair relief* made its first trip on January 23, 1969 and its final trip on January 11 1970.⁸ It completed 670 flights and delivered 11,000 tons of desperately needed food and medical supplies into the blockaded state of Biafra. Churches, relief groups and a few volunteer agencies including ecumenical alliance of Roman Catholic, protestant and Jewish organizations bombarded Ottawa and raised the flag of famine. From the beginning, Ted Johnson was at the center of it all; he carried out 10 harrowing and dangerous trips into Biafra.⁹

Four Canair relief crew members were killed when one of the super constellations crashed at *Uli*. A second plane was destroyed when it was bombed on the ground during the unloading of relief supplies for CARITAS and the world council of churches which ran more than 2,000 feeding centers.¹⁰ The Joint church aid lost 25 pilots and crew to Nigerian military government who were bent on enforcing the Biafran blockade. The Nigerian Military government of the day refused steadfastly to allow relief flights or any other form of humanitarian aid into Biafra.¹¹

Despite Joint church aids best effort, it is estimated that about 2 million Biafrans were starved to death. The world was shocked on stark pictures appeared for almost the first time on television screens of stick thin children with swollen bellies and sparse rust colored hair that symptomizes Kwashiorkor - protein deficiency that killed children in their thousands.

Biafra was a nightmare for the International Community, especially for Britain and France especially for the almost single-handed initiative of Ted Johnson, a Presbyterian leader in Canada. Johnson was unrelenting; he led a delegation of church leaders to Ottawa asking for help for starving Biafrans and was refused. The refusal to respond to appeal for assistance led to formation of Canair relief, supported without government money of any kind by Jewish leaders, the Roman Catholic Church and the major protestant denominations, the Presbyterian, United and Anglican Churches especially, the church leaders had to go back to government to ask for money or transport planes. On several occasions they were refused. Johnson and his team arrange for some MPs and some church minister to fly to Biafra on Canair relief on a fact-finding mission.¹²

Their reports, Canada and Biafran tragedy became a book and it recommended that Canada use its position to push the UN into negotiating a ceasefire, participate in relief operations and give money for humanitarian relief. The government of Canada and U Thant refused to accept their proposal.¹³ Canada eventually sent three Hercules planes as part of an international committee of the Red Cross relief effort. Not surprisingly two of the planes went to Lagos and one to Sao Tome. The government in Lagos impounded the two planes in Nigeria and ever allowed them to fly while the one in Sao Tome was sent back home after another International Committee on Red cross plane was shot down by the Nigerian government.

The attempt by Canadian government was concede an exercise in futility. The Toronto star editorial states that four weeks after being turned down by Ottawa, Canair relief bought a super

constellation for \$108,000 and in less than a month it had 28 flights into Biafra. By flying into Biafra, the ICRC and Canada argued that they would be "recognizing" the breakaway state, thus annoying the military government of Lagos. Ted Johnson argued that saving the lives of millions of men, women and children had a higher moral imperative than maintaining good diplomatic relations with Lagos whose soldiers were afraid that the national would split into many more parts than just Biafra.¹⁴

At the same time that Canada was maintaining its close posture with Nigeria, several other countries including Germany, Sweden and the U.S, refused to officially stand by and allow millions starve in Biafra. Nigerians heavily armed by Britain and Russia withheld food supplies openly stating that food was a legitimate weapon of war. As the Biafrans were pushed back from the best agricultural land into their aim barren heartland and on the crops and stores fell into the hands of the Nigerian soldiers starvation and famine appeared flapping their wings like the vultures that hovered over the feeding centre and refugee camps. Casualties were high among the civilians. Yet somehow Biafran morale remained high despite the fact that their military campaign had gone irretrievably wrong.

The Presbyterian Church played a unique role in trying to bring humanitarian aid to the suffering and a healing ministry to the whole desperate situation. In 1969, Ted Johnson outlined three lives of activity for the church.

1. Seek to maintain fellowship and support to our Christian brethren and particularly our fellow Presbyterians on both sides.
2. Engage in a vigorous role in relief work on both sides and.
3. Try to promote a peaceful settlement by maintaining contact and conversation on both sides with colleagues who are high in government responsibilities.

The real story of Biafra was told to Canadians by David MacDonald and Andrew Brewin, both Mps. The fact remains that Canadian government could not give relief funds to the church, so individuals raised some money. High protein food and milk, few drops of fish flown in Jesus Airline and Canai relief. They were getting three meals a week. The churches were occurred of manufacturing these horrendous images to raise funds to keep Ojukwu in power. But Jed Johnson insists that these images and millions were children were innocent victims of an international power play for political influence in Africa and a smuggle for control of one of the world's great oil reserves.

The courage of the Pilots, the Biafran relief workers who could unload a super constellation's 15 tons of aid in 20 minutes in the darkness, and the missionaries and medical staff who were inside Biafra, was incredible. There was an outright disregard for the law of war and basic principles of human rights during the war. Heinous crimes were perpetrated in gross violations of international standards. Life and property were destroyed and the necessary distinction as expected especially under international law of war between combatants and non-combatants were ignored.

The United States has maintained official neutrality, but in practice has tacitly supported the federal government, though contributing a reported 17 million dollars to the relief efforts of various private organizations. President Johnson announced in July that the U.S had no intention of interfering in the Nigerian's internal affairs". This has meant that the U.S is not willing to support an airlift organized by private organization that are not recognized for this purpose by the Nigerian government. On November 14, the Unites States offered to contribute 500,000 dollars to American

volunteer relief agencies to help charter a Hercules C - 130 transports to fly relief supplies into Biafra. Biafran authorities are dissatisfied with the Red Cross which they claim is both sluggish and overly responsive to the federal government demands. Private American countries contributed about 5 million dollars while American government spent 17 to 20 million 37 million dollars.¹⁵ The US brought pressure on both sides to cease fighting and urged foreign powers to contribute to relief. Some argue that US plans in Biafra have been passive and indifference.

Summary and Conclusion

The Nigerian Civil War (1967-1970), also known as the Biafran War, resulted in a humanitarian crisis, particularly affecting the Igbo population in the southeastern region. Humanitarian organizations played a crucial role in providing assistance during this tumultuous period. This summary examines the interventions of various NGOs and international bodies, focusing on their impact and challenges faced. Humanitarian organizations, including the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders)¹⁶, provided critical medical care, food, and shelter to those displaced by the conflict. These organizations aimed to address the immediate needs of the population, particularly as the war led to widespread famine and disease.

Despite their efforts, humanitarian organizations encountered significant challenges, including restrictions imposed by the Nigerian government, which sought to control the flow of aid. Access to affected areas was often limited, and there were reports of aid being diverted for military purposes. These challenges complicated the delivery of assistance and often hampered the effectiveness of humanitarian efforts. The interventions, although vital, were often insufficient to meet the overwhelming needs of the Igbo population. The combination of military blockade and famine led to an estimated two million deaths,¹⁷ with malnutrition and disease being prevalent. Despite the aid provided, the scale of suffering was immense, highlighting the limitations of external assistance in conflict situations.

The Biafran War highlighted the importance of timely and unimpeded humanitarian access in conflict zones. Lessons from this period have influenced the policies and operational strategies of humanitarian organizations in subsequent conflicts in Nigeria and beyond. The interventions of humanitarian organizations during the Nigerian Civil War were crucial in mitigating some of the suffering experienced by the Igbo population. However, significant challenges impeded their efforts, ultimately demonstrating the complexities of providing humanitarian aid in conflict situations. Understanding these dynamics is essential for improving future interventions in similar contexts.

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