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Humanitarian issues in the Biafra conflict

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Introduction¹

Over three decades have passed since the end of the Nigerian Civil War (1967 – 1970). During almost thirty months of fighting between the Federal Government and Biafran secessionists, the conflict received more attention from the west than any other previous African ‘emergency.’ From the standpoint of the international humanitarian sector, Biafra served as one of the first conflicts where issues of more contemporary complex emergencies began to develop. Biafra taught the international community how to better provide and coordinate aid and assistance to those affected by a complex emergency. From these lessons came the beginnings of a framework for several issues, including: dealing with internally displaced persons (IDPs), negotiating humanitarian access and repatriation of unaccompanied children. However, in spite of Biafra’s importance, the world seems to have little recollection of this conflict and the lessons learned.

The lessons that can be learned from Biafra seem to share a common thread of coordination, and the lack thereof. This commonality unites these lessons with the present, since problems of coordination have been found in many of the subsequent, large-scale humanitarian emergencies. The United Nations Coordination of the International Humanitarian Response to the Gulf Crisis, published in 1992, clearly points to this:

“Coordination” is one of the most overused and least understood terms in international parlance today. Those providing financial and moral support for humanitarian activities are increasingly insistent that coordination be improved and duplication, waste and competition be avoided.²

The purpose of this study is to re-visit the events of Biafra and, through debate in the humanitarian and academic communities, reconsider the lessons learned. The reason for this reconsideration is simple: little has been accomplished in terms of putting the lessons learned in Biafra to practise in present day complex emergencies.

This study is unique, in that it is based largely upon firsthand, formerly confidential documents from the archives of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United States Department of State. These documents have never before been openly considered in the context of the conflict in Biafra. The use of these documents throughout this study allows for a fresh look at a conflict, from which many of today’s most pressing humanitarian issues have their beginnings. Of particular relevance, are three issues on which this study focuses: protecting and assisting IDPs, negotiating humanitarian access and repatriation of unaccompanied children.

¹ Nathaniel H. Goetz recently completed a graduate internship with UNHCR’s Evaluation and Policy Analysis Unit, during which he prepared this paper. He wishes to thank Dr. Jeff Crisp, Arafat Jamal, Sean Loughna, Ragnhild Ek, Dr. David Turton, Dr. Nicholas Van Hear, Dr. Michael McBride, Dr. David Forsythe, Dr. Robert Lloyd, Jim and Susan Hummer, and Parul Patel for their generous assistance.

² “United Nations Coordination of the International Humanitarian Response to the Gulf Crisis, 1990 – 92,” Geneva: United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs, June 1992, p.2.

Background

The civil war in Nigeria is generally recognized as one of the first conflicts in which large-scale humanitarian aid operations were conducted at the regional level. With this in mind, this study will look broadly at the issues concerning IDPs, achieving negotiated humanitarian access and the repatriation of unaccompanied children during the Nigerian Civil War. It will consider some similarities to present-day emergencies, and look at what lessons can be learned from each issue as a means for solving problems in the future.

The roots of the conflict in Nigeria are ethnic and religious in nature. Political lines drawn up in 1914 by British colonial rulers had little regard for the vast diversity that existed within the new boundaries of the colony. Different groups, united under artificial constraints, had very little in common in terms of culture, ethnicity and religion. It was these conditions that set the stage for conflict.

In 1960, Nigeria peacefully gained its independence from Great Britain. However, many social disparities remained unchecked. The Northern and Southern regions of Nigeria were on opposite ends of the spectrum in terms of socioeconomic development. The 1999 International Committee of the Red Cross Report on the Rules of War provides a vivid picture of these disparities:

Primary amongst the differences was the disparity of educational levels between North and South – so vast that it was feared that the North would not have enough qualified civil servants to constitute a smoothly running government. In addition, economic development in the South had far outpaced that of the North. In the South, Nigerians had benefited from education and access to the colonial apparatus, while the North lacked an entrepreneurial and commercial class.³

The violence began on 15 January 1966. A coup, led by military officers, resulted in the assassination of the prime minister and other top-ranking officials. The coup failed, but its negative impact dragged the country further into crisis. In the chaos that followed, General Aguiyi Ironsi declared himself leader of Nigeria on 16 January, adopting military rule. Ironsi, an Eastern Ibo, took on an agenda aimed at domination of the country.

On 15 March 1967, three people were injured during an anti-Ibo demonstration in a market in the Western town of Ibadan. *The Times*, in Great Britain, reported that, “the incident is seen as the first phase of a reprisal against the order by Col. Ojukwu [the Eastern region’s governor] banning West Nigerians from his region.”⁴

On 30 May, Ojukwu formally declared the secession of the Eastern region and the formation of the ‘Republic of Biafra.’ Tensions reached their peak in July 1967, with the

³ “Country Report: Nigerian Country Context,” ICRC worldwide consultation on the rules of war produced by Greenberg Research, Inc. 1999.

⁴ “Inter-Tribal Riot in West Nigeria: Igbos Attacked in Ibadan Market,” *The Times* (London), 16 March 1967. 6/1/NIG [3-1964/3-1970]: Fonds 11: Records of the Central Registry, Sub-Fonds 1: Classified Subject Files: 1951 – 1970, UNHCR Archives.

assassination of Ironsi and the subsequent counter-coup that followed, led by officers from the North. On 1 August 1967, General Yakubu Gowon became the new head of state, maintaining military rule and adopting a policy of uniting Nigeria. What followed was a protracted civil war, lasting almost two and-a-half years.

Unlike other previous conflicts within Africa, the Nigerian Civil War did not go unnoticed internationally. The heavy use of the media, primarily television, (used by both sides to gain international sympathy for their cause), fed images to the world on a daily basis. The primary images shown were shocking pictures of the starvation of millions of children. The world suddenly took a critical interest in the conflict and called for humanitarian action to be taken. J.M. Clevenger, in his 1975 thesis, described this:

The time was ripe for the internationalisation of the relief operation. A sudden burst of publicity from the world's press in May and June 1968 brought the impending disaster to the forefront of the world's attention and stimulated the development of a massive international effort to rescue starving Nigerians and Biafrans.⁵

One of the organizations present within Nigeria prior to the conflict was the United States Peace Corps. Following their missions, two of its volunteers, Jim and Susan Hummer, were hired by the Nigerian Federal Government to teach in secondary school, and shared some of their experiences and perspectives of the civil war:

One Nigerian official we knew well was reluctant to comment on the Federal Government's prosecution of the war. He told us it was not their custom to criticize their leaders or to "wash their linen in public." We were aware that there was a military blockade and that those within the Eastern Region were being denied food and the necessary supplies in order to hasten their surrender. We knew that innocent people were dying from starvation and disease. We also knew that the Nigerians we lived and worked with supported the reunification of their country. They were very certain that the Federal Government would accomplish this goal through steady tightening of the blockade as the Federal forces continued to move deep into the secession area.⁶

Internally displaced persons

The term 'internally displaced person' had not yet been coined at the time of this conflict. Throughout the literature and first-hand sources consulted for this section, it was found that the term 'refugee' was largely used for both those internally displaced, as well as for those outside their country of origin. However, this was not the case for UNHCR, which did have such a distinction. Instances found in the present-day definition of internally displaced persons reflect that, in many respects, the situation that existed in Biafra was identical in nature. This is especially true of the causation, which,

⁵ Clevenger, James M. "The Political Economy of Hunger: Famine in Nigeria, 1967 – 1970," Master of Social Sciences Thesis, University of Birmingham (United Kingdom), June 1975, p.80.

⁶ E-mail exchange between the author and Jim and Susan Hummer, 16 September 2000.

argues Cohen and Deng, is predominantly as a result of “conflict among different ethnic groups or between governments and minorities of a different race, language, culture, or religion.”⁷

This particular cause of internal displacement clearly existed in Biafra. Large-scale displacement began in September 1966, after Ojukwu concluded that the safety of Easterners living outside the region could no longer be guaranteed, and asked them to return home. This request, combined with the revenge massacres of Northerners in Port Harcourt, Enugu and other Eastern cities, led to a counter-exodus of non-Easterners from the region.⁸ By the final quarter of 1966, there were hundreds of thousands of IDPs throughout Nigeria/Biafra.

Problems of protection and assistance

The most severe problems for those internally displaced came with the Federal Government’s declaration of an embargo and blockade of Biafra in 1967, which kept out precious commodities, including salt, meat and fish (staples of the Nigerian diet). In response, Biafra tried to increase its production of chickens and eggs, but as refugees from other parts of Nigeria flooded in and food stocks dwindled, so hunger grew.⁹ The IDPs most affected by this artificially created famine, were children, the victims of ‘total’ war. An early fact-finding mission in 1968, conducted by ICRC Doctor Edwin Spirgi, found that at least 300,000 children suffering from kwashiorkor.¹⁰

By the summer of 1968, the ICRC reported that three million children were near death. A combination of the vast numbers of displaced persons throughout Nigeria and the federal blockage on food was driving more than 2,500 people into the hospital every week.¹¹ Besides the deadly kwashiorkor, common ailments among the internally displaced included acute exhaustion and hunger. There was also a high need amongst IDPs for vaccination against various diseases.

Temporary camps established by the international community attempted to assist in the protection of those internally displaced. However, life in the camps was bleak. A personal account from Dr. Philip Emeagwali, who, as a child, spent many months in the St. Joseph’s Primary School of Awka – Etit camp, tells of his experience:

Many children in our camp suffered from the malnutrition disease called kwashiorkor. We stood in line for warm milk, dried stockfish (*okporoko*) and corn meal. My mentor (I have forgotten his name, but called him “teacher”) was forcefully conscripted into the Biafran army. After three days of military training, he was posted to the war front. Teacher never returned from the war

⁷ Cohen, Roberta and Deng, Francis M. (eds.) “The Forsaken People: Case Studies of the Internally Displaced,” Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1998, p.3.

⁸ Osaghae, Eghosa. “Crippled Giant: Nigeria Since Independence,” Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998, p.63.

⁹ Moorehead, Caroline. “Dunant’s Dream,” New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1988, p.615.

¹⁰ Moorehead 1998, pp.615-16. Kwashiorkor is a symptom caused by lack of protein, resulting in severe bloating and flesh deterioration.

¹¹ Moorehead 1998, p.616.

front. He was the only child of his mother. [When someone died in the camp] we unceremoniously buried the dead at the bushes behind our camp. My niece, “Baby” Okwuosa and my paternal step-grandmother were buried without a funeral.¹²

Another serious problem for IDPs came at the end of the war in January 1970. This involved how to meet the needs of the unaccompanied children displaced by the conflict. A memorandum for the creation of a welfare scheme for children stated:

These [displaced] children have to be returned sooner or later, but for the time, money and effort lavished on them to be meaningful, arrangements must be made for their continuing care and supervision upon their return. As yet no plans exist for this mainly because no properly coordinated and overall programme has been set up for the welfare of the children here in Biafra.¹³

Between 20 February and 20 March 1970, the International Social Service (ISS) and International Union for Child Welfare (IUCW) conducted a mission to Nigeria, visiting centers that had been established to deal with the unaccompanied children. The primary purpose of the centers was to assist in the identification of as many of the children as possible. However, very few had been able to achieve this monumental task. The report stated that, “this work [identification] is most difficult with those groups of children which had moved several times during the war period.”¹⁴ However, the mission found that, for the most part, the children were well cared for and there were very few staff that were “unprepared to understand and meet the needs of the children living in large groups away from their normal family environment.”¹⁵

In June 1970, the first statistics concerning the number of displaced children were released. The estimated number of children inside Nigeria was 30,000, “most of whom will have to be accommodated in the [receiving] centers, at least in transition to more permanent placement.”¹⁶

On 3 June, in response to the needs of the displaced children, the IUCW and the Federal Military Government of Nigeria reached an agreement in Lagos. It formed a “system for the [children’s] identification, tracing their families and the promotion of family reunion as well as the children’s care on a temporary or long-term basis.”¹⁷

¹² “Memories of Biafra: A Photo Essay,” Dr. Philip Emeagwali.

¹³ Ifekwunigwe, Dr. A.E. “A memorandum on the welfare scheme for refugee children,” 17 January 1970. Unit 222: Fonds 11: Records of the Central Registry, Sub-Fonds 1: Classified Subject Files: 1951 – 1970, UNHCR Archives.

¹⁴ “Notes on assignment to Nigeria for the International Union for child welfare,” International Social Service, Geneva, 8 April 1970. #30-A: Unit 222: Fonds 11: Records of the Central Registry, Sub-Fonds 1: Classified Subject Files: 1951 – 1970, UNHCR Archives.

¹⁵ International Social Service, 8 April 1970.

¹⁶ UNHCR Memorandum, 18 June 1970. #75: Unit 222: Fonds 11: Records of the Central Registry, Sub-Fonds 1: Classified Subject Files: 1951 – 1970, UNHCR Archives.

¹⁷ “An agreement made between the Federal Military Government of Nigeria and the International Union for Child Welfare,” 3 June 1970. #104: Unit 222: Fonds 11: Records of the Central Registry, Sub-Fonds 1: Classified Subject Files: 1951 – 1970, UNHCR Archives.

The role of UNHCR

On 9 November 1967, a confidential meeting was held between High Commissioner Prince Sadrudin Aga Khan and representatives of Biafra. The topic of the meeting was to discuss the problems of Ibo and the minority tribes in Eastern Nigeria resulting from the civil war. The following indicates the High Commissioner's response and policy position:

The High Commissioner informed [the representatives from Biafra] that the statute of the Office empowers him to assist in solving problems of refugees at the request of governments of countries of asylum. A refugee, in this context, is a person who is outside his country and does not, for various specified reasons, wish to avail himself of the protection of his country of origin. Since "Biafra" is not recognized as a separate state, the displaced people from other parts of Nigeria into Eastern Nigeria do not fall within the mandate of the Office and, therefore, there is nothing the Office could do for them.¹⁸

UNHCR took a position that reflected its mandate and, in doing so, could not offer protection nor assistance to those displaced persons in Biafra.¹⁹ Despite this position, UNHCR did closely monitor the problem of internal displacement. Material found in the UNHCR's archives suggests that its reasoning for doing so was because of the large number of persons who crossed frontiers into several West African states, including Gabon and the Ivory Coast.

International response

By May 1968, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), including the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), OXFAM, Caritas, World Food Programme (WFP), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), were distributing supplies and dozens of other organizations were also providing assistance. It is the ICRC that is largely credited for leading the internal humanitarian operations within Nigeria/Biafra during the conflict.

In April 1969, the ICRC, greatly helped by supplies and medical teams from UNICEF and the WCC, was running the biggest relief operation they had ever mounted, employed many hundreds of foreigners, Swiss delegates, doctors seconded from the national societies and expatriates, as well as 2,000 Nigerians.²⁰ The ICRC had 400 vehicles and various ships and aircraft, delivering over three million meals a week in

¹⁸ Notes of a confidential UNHCR meeting with Mr. Udo Affia, Commissioner for Health of breakaway Eastern Nigeria "Biafra," of 9 November 1967. 6/1/NIG [3-1964/3-1970]: Fonds 11: Records of the Central Registry, Sub-Fonds 1: Classified Subject Files: 1951 – 1970, UNHCR Archives.

¹⁹ The only way by which UNHCR could have assisted would have been by specifically being requested to by the UN General Assembly or the Secretary-General.

²⁰ Moorehead 1998, p.621.

Biafra.²¹ Between 1967 and 1970, some 60,000 tons of food was distributed to the starving population.²² The ICRC also carried out an extensive vaccination program.²³

Negotiating humanitarian access²⁴

The term ‘negotiated humanitarian access,’ like that of ‘internally displaced person,’ had not yet been coined at the time of Biafra. Instead, the term ‘negotiated agreement’ was found in several sources consulted, which had a similar meaning to ‘negotiated access.’ Similar to the present day, there was no pre-planned framework for negotiating access; rather it was done primarily on an *ad hoc* basis, by a variety of actors, mostly at the highest levels of government. Biafra is very likely to have been the first complex emergency where such negotiations took place solely in the name of transportation of aid to affected groups.

This section considers the development of negotiated access talks, primarily between the United States, the Federal Government of Nigeria and ICRC, and the extent to which they succeeded in reaching their objectives.

The access process: trial and error

By 1968, the fighting between the Federal Government and Biafran forces had escalated and, in response to the amount of civilians in need of relief, the international community made its first efforts to supply aid to those affected populations.

The first transport efforts were by religious organizations that chartered planes to send in aid, “sometimes permitting weapons to travel alongside.”²⁵ This was done primarily because no alternative existed in terms of being able to bargain with the warring parties. Secondly, since an open ‘air corridor’ existed, gunrunners took advantage of the opportunity to fly their supplies into Biafra as well. This created a situation of protection for both gunrunners and aid flights. This is because the warring parties did not want to be held responsible for shooting down a humanitarian aircraft and drawing negative attention upon themselves. Although such early efforts managed to get in some aid, the fact that weapons were sometimes transported in by the humanitarian airlifts, and gunrunners misused the system provided by the airlift, only served to increase the mistrust between the warring parties.

Unlike the independent religious groups, organizations such as the ICRC, were bound by Article 23 of the 1949 Geneva Conventions, which states:

²¹ Moorehead 1998, p.621.

²² “Famine and War: Protection of the Civilian Population in Periods of Armed Conflict,” 26th International meeting of the ICRC and RC, 15 September 1995.

²³ Moorehead 1998, p.621.

²⁴ For a closer look at the issue of negotiated humanitarian access, see M. Cutts’ “The humanitarian operation in Bosnia, 1992 – 95: Dilemmas of negotiated humanitarian access,” UNHCR *New Issues in Refugee Research*, No. 8, May 1999, and A. Richardson’s “Negotiating humanitarian access in Angola: 1990 – 2000,” UNHCR *New Issues in Refugee Research*, No. 18, June 2000.

²⁵ Moorehead 1998, p.618.

All delivery of aid in this kind of situation was to be subordinate to the agreement of the contracting power, who had to be convinced that the relief would go only to the civilians to whom it was destined and that enemy troops would derive no gain or advantage from it.²⁶

This created difficulties for the organization, but after recognizing just how severe the humanitarian problems were, Gowon gave the ICRC authorization to begin flying relief into Biafra in early 1968. Although this gesture was seen as positive, only one plane carrying 16 to 20 tons of food per night was being delivered.

However, the airlift did manage to expand with support from other International Red Cross Societies. On 8 April 1968, the ICRC commenced a regular flight operation direct from Europe to Biafra via Fernando Poo Island.²⁷ But even this was short-lived, for by August 1968, the “mercy” flights of the ICRC ceased, reportedly because “Biafran arms planes have taken advantage of the reduced flak Gowon puts up against the mercy flights, so that Gowon has stopped making any special provisions and the Red Cross has had some near misses.”²⁸

Despite the setbacks, negotiations continued. The warring parties both firmly believed that the humanitarian aid that did make it in was going to help support the other side’s military efforts. Thus, the element of mistrust became one of the primary factors that hindered the amount of aid reaching the affected populations.

United States support

United States policy toward Nigeria in 1968 was, on the whole, in agreement with the Organization of African Unity’s position of supporting a “unified” Nigeria. In terms of other African states’ support for such a policy, “more than thirty-five recognized Biafra or showed sympathy toward Biafra. The rest of them were in favor of the unified Nigeria, partly because they all shuddered at the thought of breaking up over tribal ground.”²⁹

A 12 August 1968 cable from the United States National Security Council to the President’s Special Assistant outlined specific U.S. policy toward the conflict:³⁰

- Stimulate the Red Cross to serve as the international cover for a relief operation.
- Confidentially put pressure on both sides to agree to a settlement or at least to a relief agreement.
- Offer all help necessary to make a relief operation work.

²⁶ Moorehead 1998, p.618.

²⁷ Clevenger, J.M. p.84.

²⁸ United States Department of State cable from Edward Hamilton of the US National Security Council to the President’s Special Assistant, 12 August 1968. Foreign Relations of the United States: 1964 – 1968, Volume XXIV: Africa, Department of State, Washington, DC.

²⁹ Transcript, Dean Rusk Oral History Interview IV, 8 March 1970, by Paige E. Mulhollan, Internet copy, Lyndon B. Johnson Library, p.28.

³⁰ United States Department of State, 12 August 1968.

- Push particularly hard on Gowon to dramatize the fact that it is not the Federal Government keeping the food out of Biafra.
- Work out the logistics of the relief scheme so that it is ready to move as soon as political arrangements are made.

In an effort to reopen the air corridor, Edward Hamilton of the United States National Security Council staff proposed to:

Persuade Gowon to permit airdrops of food from planes departing from Federal territory. This would allow him to inspect cargoes to be sure there are no arms; dramatize the fact that he wants to feed the hungry; and it would actually move sizeable amounts of food into Biafra.³¹

As the United States was preparing this proposal, the ICRC was working on a new plan to airlift aid from an airstrip in Federal territory to one in Biafra. However, with both of these plans for a new air ‘mercy’ corridor, there came many problems: 1) should Gowon and Ojukwu approve the plan, they would need to each provide an airstrip for the exclusive use of humanitarian actors under the guidance of the ICRC and, 2) they would need to at least provide some sort of guarantee that those international aid workers would be safe from attack.

The United States Embassy in Lagos presented both proposals to Gowon on 14 August 1968. However, they were rejected. A State Department cable on the 15 August stated:

Gowon told the [United States Ambassador] that he had already decided that the FMG [Federal Military Government] could not accept the ICRC's proposal for a relief airstrip because the airstrip that Ojukwu had offered was already under attack and likely to fall into FRG hands soon and because he did not like the way the ICRC had handled the matter, attempting to face the FMG with *fait accompli*.³²

In response, United States President Lyndon B. Johnson sent Gowon a cable concerning the proposed access corridor. Johnson attempted to appeal to Gowon personally in order to get him to reconsider the proposal. The cable read:

Knowing that you [Gowon] share my own deep concern over the suffering of those innocent persons, I feel justified in addressing this personal appeal to you to give your urgent agreement to the ICRC proposals for an air mercy corridor. Hopefully, this can be followed by rapid agreement on a land corridor.³³

Once again, there was rejection from the Federal Government. For the international community, especially the ICRC and United States, this meant “frustration by the failure

³¹ United States Department of State, 12 August 1968.

³² United States Department of State cable to the United States Embassy in Nigeria, 15 August 1968. Foreign Relations of the United States: 1964 – 1968, Volume XXIV: Africa, Department of State, Washington, DC.

³³ United States Department of State, 15 August 1968.

of Biafra and the Federal Government to reach agreement on the methods of transportation and distribution.”³⁴ J.M. Clevenger noted the complexity of this issue:

Neither of the belligerents was willing to concede the superiority of humanitarian over political considerations, which made it impossible to reach any agreement about the routes and methods to be used for moving relief supplies through the Federal blockade. In these circumstances, the humanitarian agencies felt compelled, given the gravity of the nutritional situation inside the enclave [of Biafra] in the summer of 1968, to step up their ‘clandestine’ airlift of relief supplies.³⁵

Another difficulty lay in the internal operations of the access negotiations. Since there were several relief organizations working within Biafra, it became difficult to coordinate one united effort amongst them. Instead, there emerged an element of competition amongst humanitarian organizations. A cable from the National Security Council to the President’s Special Assistant noted this on 14 November 1968:

[There are] very real difficulties of getting relief organizations to pull together and of persuading the two sides in the civil war to let them operate as freely as necessary.³⁶

Because of the amount of media attention being given to the conflict, American public opinion grew in favour of humanitarian support for Biafra. At the Congressional level, Senators Kennedy and Mondale, among others, had been approached by church voluntary agencies to help secure eight Globemaster transports [aircraft] for the international relief effort. Secretary Dean Rusk recommended in a 24 December 1968 United States Security Council meeting that,

The only real problem [with supplying these aircraft to the various church voluntary agencies] is with the [Nigerian] Federal Government. They are bound to object to our giving planes, if only because they regard the voluntary agencies as pro-Biafran and sometimes gunrunners. We have to come up with 8 planes rather than 6 and can afford to split the contribution between the voluntary agencies and Red Cross, which puts a better face on it for the Feds. This deal makes eminent good sense. It will cost us nothing, can save lives, and will, for the time being at least, lessen the Congressional heat here at home.³⁷

The plan, approved by President Johnson the following day, would significantly help the ICRC in its efforts to airlift aid into Biafra. Representatives from Biafra met secretly

³⁴ Keesing’s Research Report of Africa Independent: A Survey of Political Demands, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1972.

³⁵ Clevenger, J.M. p.86.

³⁶ United States Department of State Cable from Harold H. Saunders of the National Security staff to the President’s Special Assistant, 14 November 1968. Foreign Relations of the United States: 1964 – 1968, Volume XXIV: Africa, Department of State, Washington, DC.

³⁷ Memorandum of 24 December 1968 from Roger Morris of the National Security Council staff to the President’s Special Assistant. Foreign Relations of the United States: 1964 – 1968, Volume XXIV: Africa, Department of State, Washington, DC.

with Rusk to discuss the preparation of an airfield to be used “exclusively” for relief. Rusk reported that although there were many problems with this proposal, “we are quietly offering to send in an expert from one of the relief agencies to see what they have in mind. We are telling the Biafrans, as we tell everyone else, that we are closing no options on saving lives.”³⁸

By the end of 1968, a new airstrip had been opened in Biafra for ICRC use. Aware of this, the Federal Government allowed the flights to resume, however, on an “at your own risk” basis. In January 1969, the ICRC successfully negotiated with the Governments of Equatorial Guinea and Dahomey to use airstrips for flying in relief to Biafra. With airstrips on Fernando Poo island, Equatorial Guinea and at Contonou, Dahomey “the humanitarian aid airlifts occurred under the auspices of Inter-Church Aid” between 1 and 2 February 1969.³⁹

The United States and ICRC reached an agreement of cooperation in early 1969, dividing the access negotiations between air and land corridors, the United States taking the former. Although previous efforts to negotiate a land corridor under President Johnson had failed, it was agreed that the Nixon Administration to make a final attempt:

The Americans believed that use of the Cross River was the best way to get large-scale relief into Biafra, with foodstuffs off-load onto shallow watercraft from ocean-going vessels. This Cross River project was eventually agreed to in principle by both sides, but it was largely a meaningless gesture, as the parties subsequently refused to discuss specifics.⁴⁰

Politically, the possibility of a land corridor seemed impossible. One of the many disagreements between the warring parties was simple, yet it illustrates both the mistrust and complexity of what was occurring: Ojukwu forbade the necessary food to reach the country through a neutral corridor for fear Nigerian troops would poison it.⁴¹ The ICRC continued to successfully airlift aid into Biafra, although each flight was still done on an “at your own risk” basis. This only lasted four months, when the risks involved tragically cost the organization. On 5 June, an ICRC DC-7 aircraft was shot down by the Federal air force over Biafra, killing the three aid workers on board. Because of this incident, serious disputes over the conduct of relief operations arose and the airlift was again suspended.

Access talks between July and September 1969 produced an agreement between the ICRC and Federal Government concerning daytime flights.⁴² The agreement was signed on 13 September. However, the next day, it was rejected by the Biafran government on the grounds that it contained “no adequate guarantee against Nigerian military exploitation of the flights.”⁴³

³⁸ Memorandum, 24 December 1968.

³⁹ Keesing’s 1972.

⁴⁰ Forsythe, David P. “Humanitarian Politics,” Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977, p.188.

⁴¹ “Memories of Biafra: A Photo Essay,” Dr. Philip Emeagwali.

⁴² Keesing’s 1972.

⁴³ Keesing’s 1972.

Effectively, this incident ended any more attempts to negotiate access. A formal agreement was signed on 2 October 1969 in Lagos between the Federal Government and the ICRC, terminating the role of the ICRC as relief coordinating authority in Federal territory.⁴⁴

*'Ground rules'*⁴⁵

One of the factors that caused frustration for the United States in its access negotiations with the warring parties was the inability to come to an agreement on what the 'ground rules' for access should be. Without agreement on such rules, talks between the warring parties and United States were largely ineffective. Several factors contributed to the inability to reach agreement on the ground rules, including: mistrust of humanitarian actors (which were seen, at times, as pro-Biafran) and mistrust of the humanitarian airlift itself (which was viewed as a 'cover' for running guns into both Nigeria and Biafra).

In a 1970 interview, Secretary Dean Rusk pointed out the frustration that occurred over the inability to agree on the ground rules for access:

We [the United States] were concerned about food supplies for the Biafrans; we were ready to put in large amounts of food ourselves from our own stocks and were prepared to divert food ships going to other countries to Biafra. But the leaders of the two sides in Nigeria never could get together on the ground rules for furnishing food to the Biafrans, so the problem was not the availability of food but the ability to get it to those who were hungry.⁴⁶

Access negotiations experienced many difficulties, making them only partly successful. These difficulties or "points of friction," as noted in 1977 by Dr. David P. Forsythe, included:⁴⁷

- Shielding of the gunrunners by ICRC planes, albeit unintended.
- The ICRC had asked Lagos to lift its blockade in the fall of 1967.
- The Federal military requisitioned some Red Cross aircraft for military purposes.
- The Federal air force bombed not only civilian targets in Biafra, but Red Cross installations as well – and Red Cross personnel were killed by Federal troops.

⁴⁴ Keesing's 1972.

⁴⁵ The term 'ground rules' has been used over the past few years in Southern Sudan, where it was believed to have originally emerged. However, as evidenced by an 8 March 1970 interview with Dean Rusk, this is not the case and the term dates much earlier to Biafra.

⁴⁶ Rusk interview, 8 March 1970, p.27. It must also be noted that the United States did recognize that the leadership of Biafra was creating difficulties for getting aid in, as well. Rusk stated in the same interview, "Colonel Ojukwu, the leader of the Biafran forces, has to carry a heavy share of the responsibility for the deaths by starvation in Biafra because he too was very difficult about the ground rules for getting the food in."

⁴⁷ Forsythe 1977, p.189.

Repatriation of unaccompanied children

In August 1968, evacuations led by Caritas International, began transporting children out of Nigeria to Sao Tome. Subsequent evacuations to Gabon were arranged by other international organizations, including the “Biafran” National Red Cross Society, the Order of Malta, the French Red Cross and Terre des Hommes. Similar evacuations also took place to the Ivory Coast.

The Ifekwunigwe repatriation scheme

In January 1969, Dr. A.E. Ifekwunigwe, Chief Paediatrician of the Okporoh Hospital (Nigeria), published a memorandum on the welfare scheme for refugee children, which created a framework to be used for the eventual repatriation of the evacuated children. Because of his position and experience (having participated extensively in the 1968 evacuation), Ifekwunigwe was entrusted by the Federal authorities with coordinating the repatriation of the Nigerian children. In January 1970, Ifekwunigwe published a second memorandum as a follow-up.

Ifekwunigwe’s memoranda were extremely valuable in that they served as the framework adopted as the final repatriation scheme. They provided detailed analysis and solutions, while addressing the shortcomings of the evacuation process. Most importantly, they provided the evidence that repatriation of unaccompanied children was a key policy concern for all sides involved in the Biafran conflict.

In his memorandum of 17 January 1969, Ifekwunigwe wrote:

One should consider the problem not in the narrow context of evacuation of a very small proportion of the children abroad, but one should take a global view of the situation and think of evacuation of children abroad as just one facet.⁴⁸ With regard to the coordination of the evacuation program, he noted that “there has been no definite plan to guide them as to the priorities of our needs and no attempt has been made to coordinate their activities in order to avoid the waste that results from duplication of effort. They should be encouraged as much as possible to devote their attention to what can be done for the children here in Biafra rather than having their attention diverted by the scheme for evacuating the children abroad.”⁴⁹

Ifekwunigwe’s plan allowed for the process of repatriation not to be rushed. It rested largely on making sure that the ‘best interests’ of the children were met and that adequate staff (properly trained) and ‘reception’ centers were available before the children were moved from the host countries. Ifekwunigwe wrote:

It is desirable that the children should be returned to “Biafra” when they are well enough. The period varies with individual children, but this is generally

⁴⁸ Ifekwunigwe, Dr. A.E. “A memorandum on the welfare scheme for refugee children,” 17 January 1969, Fonds 11: Records of the Central Registry, Sub-Fonds 1: Classified Subject Files: 1951 – 1970, UNHCR Archives.

⁴⁹ Ifekwunigwe 1969.

about 3 to 6 months. However, as stressed earlier, for the exercise to be worthwhile, adequate arrangements for their resettlement and continuing care must be made. It is possible to set up camps for these children on return, but this has limitations and obvious disadvantages. Even if they go to a camp immediately on return, it should be only a transit camp for about 2 to 4 weeks and every effort should be made to place them either in their own homes or with a suitable guardian. A register of such children in the area should be kept by a Welfare Officer, specially appointed to pay home visits on them. The Relief Organizations should be encouraged to set up a Nutrition Center in each area to which these children have been returned.⁵⁰

Moving toward repatriation

In April 1970, a meeting at UNHCR was held to begin planning for the possible participation in the repatriation of the children from Gabon and the Ivory Coast. One of the main points discussed was the pilot repatriation scheme, which was first drafted in January 1969 and 1970 by Dr. A.E. Ifekwunigwe (as seen above.) This plan was tentatively agreed to by the Federal Government of Nigeria, as well as the Governments of Ivory Coast and Gabon, but final assurances that the children's well-being would be ensured was still a topic of primary concern.

At the meeting, UNHCR decided to take a role in the repatriation, thus making its services available to the Governments of Nigeria, Gabon and the Ivory Coast. In terms of the status of the children as defined by its mandate, UNHCR held that it "did not consider these children to be refugees and therefore, its offer of assistance [in the repatriation] falls within its good offices activities."⁵¹ The Federal Government of Nigeria also held this position, having indicated in a memorandum to the High Commissioner that it "is unable to accept that one of the criteria under which the status of refugee is conferred on any person under the appropriate Geneva Convention is a voluntary wish of the person to live outside his country."⁵² Instead, the Federal Government referred to the children as "evacuees."⁵³

On 3 May 1970, an article appeared in the *New York Enquirer* based on an interview with Princess Cecilia Bourban Parma concerning her experiences that she claimed to have had with affected children in Biafra during the conflict. In a letter from the Embassy of Nigeria in Washington, DC to Robin Jordan, Chairperson of Americans for Children's Relief, it was believed that the interview was designed to:

...arouse sympathy for, and perpetuate the idea of, the secession and the rebellion, well over three months after the civil war has ended, and at a time when those who engaged in this civil war are working together towards

⁵⁰ Ifekwunigwe 1969.

⁵¹ UNHCR Note to the file of 6 August 1970, #104-A: Unit 222: Fonds 11: Records of the Central Registry, Sub-Fonds 1: Classified Subject Files: 1951 – 1970, UNHCR Archives.

⁵² Memorandum from the Federal Government of Nigeria to the High Commissioner, June 1970, Unit 222: Fonds 11: Records of the Central Registry, Sub-Fonds 1: Classified Subject Files: 1951 – 1970, UNHCR Archives.

⁵³ Ibid.

reconciliation and rehabilitation of all concerned. Such an article, and its publication at this time, is an unfortunate act and a disservice to everyone, and not least to those who Princess Cecilia claims to espouse.”⁵⁴

The interview focused on Bourban Parma’s supposed 15 months in Biafra, and never once mentions that any sort of international concern was being given to the war-affected children of Biafra.⁵⁵ A few weeks later, Bourban Parma denied conducting the interview, calling it “fabricated.”⁵⁶ Although not directly involved, UNHCR monitored the situation very closely, as Americans for Children’s Relief was playing a key role in the repatriation and the incident could have potentially complicated relations with the Federal Government of Nigeria.

Negotiating repatriation

UNHCR’s role of negotiator did not begin until the final details for the repatriation scheme had been worked out between the Governments of Nigeria, Gabon and the Ivory Coast. The original request for UNHCR to step-in came from the Federal Government of Nigeria, which was experiencing difficulties attempting to negotiate on its own with two governments who did not believe that it was stable enough for the repatriation:

Nigeria remained acutely aware of the support of Gabon and the Ivory Coast for the Biafran cause during the war, while Gabon and the Ivory Coast wished reassurances that conditions in the former secessionist areas were suitable for the return of the children.⁵⁷

The second factor involved international borders. Since the children had been evacuated to Gabon and the Ivory Coast, each government felt that it was solely responsible for those children within its borders and, therefore, did not wish to have any sort of international intervention. This was especially true with the Government of Gabon, who, in March 1970, issued a message to those international organizations dealing with the Nigerian children, as received through the United States Embassy in Livreville:

President Bongo of Gabon convoked all the local voluntary agencies to inform them that they should not become involved in the question of Nigerian children, who were the sole responsibility of the Gabonese Government.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Letter from the Embassy of Nigeria (sender’s name illegible) to Mrs. Robin Jordan, Chairperson of Americans for Children’s Relief, 28 April 1970, Unit 222: Fonds 11: Records of the Central Registry, Sub-Fonds 1: Classified Subject Files: 1951 – 1970, UNHCR Archives. The article linked Jordan to Bourban Parma, temporarily affecting the relationship between Americans for Children’s Relief and the Nigerian Federal Government.

⁵⁵ See “Princess Tearfully Tells of Her 15 Months Helping Children in Biafra,” *New York Enquirer*, 3 May 1970, Unit 222: Fonds 11: Records of the Central Registry, Sub-Fonds 1: Classified Subject Files: 1951 – 1970, UNHCR Archives.

⁵⁶ Confidential UNHCR Interoffice Memorandum of 14 May 1970, #53: Unit 222: Fonds 11: Records of the Central Registry, Sub-Fonds 1: Classified Subject Files: 1951 – 1970, UNHCR Archives.

⁵⁷ Holborn, Louise. “Refugees: A Problem of Our Time,” Volume II, Mentuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. 1975, p.1392.

⁵⁸ UNHCR Memorandum of 10 March 1970, #10: Unit 222: Fonds 11: Records of the Central Registry, Sub-Fonds 1: Classified Subject Files: 1951 – 1970, UNHCR Archives.

On 5 May 1970, High Commissioner Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan sent a cable to Gowon expressing his willingness to send UNHCR Director of Operations Thomas Jamieson to Lagos to begin to “discuss how UNHCR might proceed to assist with the humanitarian objective of repatriating the children now outside of Nigeria.”⁵⁹ To help matters, on 20 May, President Bongo of Gabon announced that he was willing to begin negotiations for the repatriation of Nigerian children within his country. A UNHCR cable of 20 May stated:

Arrangements for the return to Nigeria of children evacuated to Gabon from former Biafra could only be made through direct negotiations between Nigerian and Gabonese representatives, with the possible mediation of Cameroon President Ahmadou Ahidjo.”⁶⁰

Although both of these steps were small, they were the first concrete commitments made by UNHCR and Gabon to begin to work toward the repatriation.

Reaching agreement

It took until the beginning of June 1970 for Gowon to respond to the High Commissioner’s offer. Gowon had previously met with Antonie Noel, Chief of the Legal Section for Africa and Asia of UNHCR in February 1970 and had requested assistance in ascertaining the exact numbers of the Nigerian children and their supporting staff inside Gabon, the Ivory Coast and Sao Tome; and in helping to provide the identities of those children. Gowon reminded the High Commissioner that he had not yet heard from him on the progress made towards those two points, and once again requested his assistance in the matter. The High Commissioner compiled the information for Gowon one week later, thus helping to seal the final details for the repatriation. The following relevant information was included:⁶¹

- 3,940 Nigerian children in Gabon, 2,792 of whom have been identified.
- 908 Nigerian children in the Ivory Coast and it is unsure how many have been identified.
- Between 120 and 130 in Sao Tome and it is unsure how many have been identified.
- The children in general are in good health and are being taken care of either by the government concerned, jointly with the local Red Cross Society, and/or by private confessional and non-confessional agencies.
- The High Commissioner recently took steps to obtain all necessary data on the children concerned (identity with photographs, place of birth, physical and mental conditions, etc.) This work is now being carried out in the Ivory Coast and will be available shortly.

⁵⁹ UNHCR Outgoing Cable of 5 May 1970, #18-A: Unit 222: Fonds 11: Records of the Central Registry, Sub-Fonds 1: Classified Subject Files: 1951 – 1970, UNHCR Archives.

⁶⁰ UNHCR Incoming Cable of 21 May 1970, #57-A: Unit 222: Fonds 11: Records of the Central Registry, Sub-Fonds 1: Classified Subject Files: 1951 – 1970, UNHCR Archives.

⁶¹ “Data available on Nigerian children outside their homeland,” UNHCR memorandum of 9 June 1970, #69: Unit 222: Fonds 11: Records of the Central Registry, Sub-Fonds 1: Classified Subject Files: 1951 – 1970, UNHCR Archives.

On 25 June 1970, it was announced that Gabon and Nigeria had agreed on:

... a rapid and dignified repatriation of refugee children evacuated from secessionist Biafra in 1968. Under an agreement worked out through the mediation of President Ahmadou Ahidjo of Cameroon, Nigeria has undertaken to transport the children home as soon as possible. About 3,500 youngsters will be involved.⁶²

The High Commissioner, in order to further assist in the effort, made the decision to help fund the repatriation in late July 1970. Together with funding from UNHCR and cooperation between the Governments of Gabon, the Ivory Coast and Nigeria, the repatriation was ready to take place. As had been outlined in the Ifekwunigwe memorandums, receiving centers had been established under the auspices of the Nigerian Red Cross, supported by other international organizations, including WFP and UNICEF.

By September 1970, 891 children in the Ivory Coast had been identified and, with completed dossiers (at the earlier request of the Federal Government), were ready to be repatriated. In October, the High Commissioner was called upon to “help negotiate the final arrangements between the Governments of Nigeria, Gabon and the Ivory Coast for the airlifting of the children.”⁶³

A few weeks later, Thomas Jamieson, UNHCR Director of Operations, conducted his mission (which had been originally proposed to Gowon in June 1970) and found:

... all of the centers, each with a capacity to accommodate 300 to 350 children, were adequately equipped and staffed, largely by Nigerians, and ready to receive the children. Food supplied had been donated by WFP and blankets and equipment by UNICEF.”⁶⁴

Between 9 and 22 November 1970, the operation to repatriate the 891 children from the Ivory Coast took place. The airlift for the children in Gabon occurred in two stages: the first between 23 November and 20 December, and the second between 11 January and 8 February 1971. In all, 3,711 of the refugee children in Gabon and the Ivory Coast were repatriated by an airlift totalling 78 flights.⁶⁵ The total cost of the operation was estimated to be about \$500,000, of which Denmark [the largest donor] contributed \$76,000.⁶⁶

⁶² UNHCR Incoming Cable of 27 June 1970, #25: Unit 222: Fonds 11: Records of the Central Registry, Sub-Fonds 1: Classified Subject Files: 1951 – 1970, UNHCR Archives.

⁶³ Holborn, p.1392.

⁶⁴ Addendum to Report to General Assembly (XXV), Supplement Number 12-A (A/8012/Add.1), p.25 (also cited in Holborn 1975).

⁶⁵ P. Rel. REF/555, 10 February 1971 (from Holborn 1975).

⁶⁶ Holborn, p.1393.

Conclusion

As discussed in the introduction, a key common theme that emerged in the three areas of foci of this research was that of coordination. Indeed, coordination continues to be a key problem that hinders current day complex emergencies. The following list of lessons which can be drawn from the Biafran conflict share many similarities to present day complex emergencies:

1. In times of conflict, internal displacement will inevitably occur and the needs of IDPs will need to be identified (including protection and assistance issues) and the means found to implement programs to meet those needs. It is important to identify how to best implement such programs and who should be involved in their planning and implementation.
2. Although the circumstances under which access negotiations take place vary, it is important to establish a clear, pre-set framework for how such negotiations will be conducted. The ability to accomplish this allows for effective communication between the actors involved (including the warring parties) and the ability to establish a clear set of ground rules at the onset of negotiations.
3. Establishing a clear set of ground rules with the warring parties fosters trust between the various actors involved, increasing the potential for success in negotiating access.
4. It is vital to develop a framework for the methods of transportation and distribution of aid with the warring parties as early as possible. This will minimize confusion over which organizations are participating in the access negotiations and the delivery of aid, and provides the warring parties with a clear and concise plan of action.
5. If the evacuation of children from the affected region(s) is not coordinated effectively, then efforts are likely to be duplicated and valuable time wasted.
6. There is a need to recognize, that regardless of the magnitude of the evacuation, it will not be possible to remove all children from the affected region(s). Thus, it is important for more attention to be paid to those children who are left within the affected region(s) in terms of humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, by allowing host countries to take responsibility for what they have volunteered to do (taking in the children), primary concern can be given to those children left in the affected region(s).
7. The process of repatriation of unaccompanied children should not be rushed. It requires careful planning and time to ensure that the best interests of the children are met.
8. If possible, the identification of unaccompanied children before, or during, evacuation saves both time and confusion when it is time to safely repatriate them.

Have we learned from Biafra?

Unfortunately, not a great deal seems to have been learnt from the experience of Biafra. During the three subsequent decades, many of the problems faced continue in present day complex emergencies. Although some of issues faced today also emerged in Biafra, some of the lessons which the international community should have learnt have not been implemented. Several of the most recent emergencies, such as Bosnia and Rwanda, illustrate this all too clearly.

In order that the events in Biafra in the 1960s become no more than a fading memory, studies such as this, should remind us of what did happen and what was learned as a result. It is important to draw upon the experience of past conflicts as a means of assessing lessons learned.

Appendix A

List of Acronyms

ACR	Americans for Children’s Relief
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
FMG	Federal Military Government of Nigeria (also known as the FRG)
FRG	Federal Republican Government of Nigeria
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDPs	Internally displaced persons
ISS	International Social Service
IUCW	International Union for Child Welfare
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NRC	Nigerian Red Cross
NSC	National Security Council (United States)
OCHA	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WCC	World Council of Churches
WFP	World Food Programme
YMCA	Young Men’s Christian Association

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