

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS

HELP TO WAR VICTIMS IN NIGERIA ¹

Protection and Information

Material relief action undertaken by the ICRC in Nigeria and in the secessionist state (Biafra) has made it possible to feed almost one and a half million people. The size of the operation has overshadowed the International Committee's activities of protection and information in these regions: visiting prisoners of war, mail routing via the Central Tracing Agency, evacuation of the seriously wounded and of foreigners. Nevertheless, all these are presenting the ICRC with very real problems.

FEDERAL NIGERIA

Prisoners of War and Civilian Detainees.—The main difficulty for the Lagos authorities has been the fact that their country obviously did not initially possess any camps suitable for the accommodation of several hundreds of prisoners of war and civil detainees.

The inevitable result has been overcrowding in civilian prisons. To alleviate this situation until special buildings for prisoners of war and perhaps civilian detainees have been built, the ICRC delegates have obtained permission for prisoners of war to spend at least five hours a day outside their cells and that the latter be aired as much as possible.

¹ Under this chapter heading, in our January issue, we gave lists of contributions in cash and in kind received from National Societies in 1968. This information did not truly reflect the full efforts exerted by some National Societies. We have, for instance, since been advised of the figures for the Swedish Red Cross which amounted, according to a communication from that Society, to 9,033,578.97 Swedish Crowns, or 7,497,870.— Swiss francs.

Because of the danger of illness in such overcrowding, and because of the scarcity of doctors (many having been sent to the battle zones), a doctor-delegate from the ICRC has been sent to Lagos to deal exclusively with prisoners of war.

The Nigerian Red Cross has also been asked to make available a male nurse for each of the three largest prisoner of war camps.

The ICRC delegates themselves regularly provide prisoners of war with such items as blankets, cigarettes, clothing, underclothing, soap, newspapers, vitamins, games, etc. . .

In all these activities, in spite of the inevitable slowness due to the exceptional circumstances, the Nigerian authorities have been co-operative. Certain prison Governors have shown exceptional goodwill towards the ICRC, in the belief that they had a task to carry out *with* the delegates.

The same is not true for civilian detainees, whom the ICRC has not yet been able to visit. It is hoped that the Nigerian Government will be as co-operative in this case as it has been towards prisoners of war.

Red Cross messages.—The ICRC Central Tracing Agency has opened an office in Lagos that has already dealt with over a thousand messages from families to persons who can no longer be contacted through regular mail services, or from secessionist regions (not including the mail for Nigerian prisoners of war in the hands of the enemy).

These messages (25 words, subject to censorship, concerning only family and personal matters) are from various sources and for various destinations—as is the case in all armed conflicts. The senders live abroad or even in Nigeria. Having lost contact with their relatives, they have reason to believe that the persons concerned are living in the disputed areas at that time under the control of the federal military Government. The whereabouts of the addressees are then investigated with the aid of the Nigerian Red Cross, which has someone in each emergency relief centre to trace persons having no address. The difficulties and time spent on some individual cases are not hard to imagine. The Nigerian Red Cross therefore hopes soon to have permission to make regular use of the National Radio wavelengths to broadcast the names of persons for whom messages

have been received. Unless this can be done, much of the tracing will have to be abandoned through lack of information needed to pinpoint the whereabouts of the missing persons.

It also happens that senders living in the secessionist area may be cut off from their families by the course of events. Their messages are sent via the Central Tracing Agency in Geneva. After being handed in at the Agency in Lagos, they are sent via the post (where possible), or, as we mentioned above, through the Nigerian Red Cross. Family messages going in the opposite direction are sent to the Lagos office and reach the addressees in the secessionist areas via Geneva.

The humanitarian importance of such an exchange cannot be exaggerated. It is the last link between people separated for who knows how long a period of time. For someone involved in a long search, patiently putting together the pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, the reward comes from the eyes of a mother who has just learned that her son is alive, and he knows that in spite of all the failures, his few successes are worth the effort.

SECESSIONIST AREAS (BIAFRA)

Red Cross messages.—The Central Tracing Agency also has an office on this side, undertaking the same work as the Lagos office. That is, it helps persons throughout the world who want to know what has happened to their families living in a war-stricken land.

The messages sent by the Agency in Geneva do not therefore come from Nigeria alone but from many countries. It is even more difficult to trace the addressees in this area, where more than half the population is displaced and where so few people live in their own dwelling.

Once again, local Red Cross aid is as effective as it is essential. And once again, the situation will not become satisfactory until the authorities allow their radio to be used in tracing addressees. This is all the more necessary since it is impossible to envisage using motorized vehicles when fuel supplies are only just sufficient to permit distribution of food to the starving.

Prisoners of war.—It will be remembered how difficult it was during the Second World War to feed prisoners of war in those coun-

tries where the citizens themselves did not have enough to eat. The same problem obtains in Biafra, where it is particularly acute.

Thus, the ICRC took upon itself the task of supplying an important part of their diet, namely protein-rich foods. In practice such an operation is far from easy, since it is only practicable when all prisoners of war are concentrated in one or at the most two camps reserved for them alone.

In the area held by the secessionists there is no camp or even a prison adaptable to holding several hundred detainees and the authorities have been obliged to take over schools for use as prisoner of war camps. It is not difficult to envisage the security problems involved and it is to be hoped that they will soon be solved—the prisoners' health depends on it. They are regularly visited by ICRC doctor-delegates who provide them with medicines. But this of course is no substitute for food.

The ICRC delegates have also distributed clothing and blankets, although the weight restrictions imposed by the airlift make it impossible to distribute aid equally to both sides.

The application of the Geneva Conventions in the case of civilian detainees is subject to the same problems here as in Lagos, except that the number of persons involved is considerably less.

Hospitalization of the seriously wounded.—In the first place, the ICRC dealt with the evacuation of foreigners from Biafra. Thus, 700 persons were taken by the ICRC to Fernando Poo and from there were repatriated.

But that was not enough. Last month's edition of the *International Review* gave details of a new International Committee initiative—the hospitalization abroad of those seriously wounded in the war. The Committee has undertaken to evacuate to Europe (with the permission, either tacit or explicit, of the authorities concerned) a number of seriously wounded civilian and military victims of the war, including women and children as well as men, who could not have been operated on on the spot to enable them to become socially useful again.

The ICRC's role in this operation is to select those to be evacuated and a doctor-delegate was sent to do this on the spot. After selection they are sent to Europe where they are taken over by

various National Societies of the Red Cross who eventually repatriate them.

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Forty-seven seriously wounded Biafrans—men, women and children—left Cotonou on the 18th February bound for Europe aboard one of the DC-7 aircraft which the Swedish Red Cross had made available to the ICRC.¹

These casualties, who arrived in Cotonou in another of the aircraft assigned to the ICRC airlift, will be treated in hospitals in Denmark (Copenhagen), France (Paris), Italy (Malcesine), Norway (Oslo) and Switzerland (Basle, Zurich, Lausanne and Berne).

The National Red Cross Societies of these countries took care of them, saw to their admission to hospital for treatment and later will attend to their repatriation. The World Veterans' Federation co-operated in this action.

These seriously wounded, who could not be given adequate treatment in Biafra, were accompanied by seven Biafran nurses. They were escorted, to the towns where they were to be admitted to hospital, by Dr. Ulrich Middendorp, ICRC doctor delegate with many missions to his credit.

The ICRC has also taken steps to ensure that the casualties who are former combatants will not, after recovery, be re-enlisted.

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In all these fields the ICRC is pleased to be able to continue the work of over a century in contributing to relieving the sufferings of war both in the prisoner of war camps and hospitals as well as in those families released from anxiety by the Red Cross messages.

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¹ *Plate.*—A wounded Biafran arriving in Zurich by an ICRC aircraft, for treatment in a European hospital.

As well as distributing emergency supplies, the Red Cross tends the wounded.

Material Relief Operations

The Airlifts

Last month, in its regular account of the large scale ICRC operation to assist the victims of the war in Nigeria, the *International Review* reported that, on 28 January, the Government of the Republic of Dahomey had authorized International Committee aircraft bound for the secessionist territory (Biafra) to take off from Cotonou with relief goods. The first flight on the Cotonou-Uli airlift was by a "Transall" freighter on 2 February.

Mr. August Lindt, ICRC Commissioner General for West Africa went to Biafra to discuss with the authorities the obstacles encountered by the ICRC in forwarding relief and ways and means of ensuring regular flights.

From Cotonou the ICRC aircraft made 40 flights in the first ten nights of operation, conveying to Biafra 435 tons of foodstuffs, much of which was purchased in Dahomey.

ICRC relief flights between Santa Isabel (Equatorial Guinea), and Biafra were resumed on the night of 12-13 February. They are operating simultaneously with another airlift to Biafra from Cotonou in Dahomey. Flights from Santa Isabel started again as the Equatorial Guinea government had once more authorized the ICRC to use this inter-continental airport, albeit subject to certain limitations.

The aircraft which re-opened the route was a DC-7, made available to the ICRC by the Swedish Red Cross. In two flights it conveyed five tons of rice and fifteen tons of dried fish.

Of the airlifts taking food and medical supplies to Biafra, the one from Santa Isabel is the shorter. The ICRC is therefore pleased to resume this service which it operated from 3 September 1968 to 14 January 1969.

Thanks to the two airlifts, total food and medical supplies landed in Biafra by 17 February was 8,000 tons. At that date the ICRC had six transport planes in service; four based on Cotonou (two DC-6 AB's, one DC-6 B and one Transall, the latter provided

NIGERIA



As well as distributing emergency supplies, the Red Cross tends the wounded.

Photo Max Vaterlaus



A wounded Biafran arriving in Zurich by an ICRC aircraft, for treatment in a European hospital.

Photo Comet, Zurich

by the German Red Cross in the Federal Republic of Germany) and at Santa Isabel two DC-7 C's made available by the Swedish Red Cross.

Two nights later, aircraft on the airlifts operated by the ICRC made ten flights, carrying 102 tons of food, medical supplies and other relief goods.

The greater part of the cargoes consisted of Indian meal as there is a grave shortage of carbohydrate foods in the devastated areas, where, in the most productive, crops will not be ready for harvesting until March-April and elsewhere until April-May.

In addition the aircraft conveyed malted milk, powdered milk, dried fish and four tons of blankets to provide refugees—mostly children—with some protection against the cold during the coming rainy season.

Between the 21st and 22nd February the Red Cross aircraft touched down eleven times in Biafra. They delivered 114 tons of food, medical and other relief supplies, including 64 tons of malted milk and 42 tons of dried fish to alleviate the serious shortage of carbohydrates and proteins facing the population, especially the children.

Sea Transport

One of the first cargoes to supply the Dahomey-Biafra airlift was unloaded on 8 February at Cotonou from a Japanese ship. It delivered to the ICRC 237 tons of foodstuffs comprising donations to the League of Red Cross Societies for Biafra. Five other vessels were then on route to Cotonou with food and medical supplies.

New relief programme

As can be seen, ICRC relief work continues in the secessionist province, where Red Cross aircraft deliver emergency supplies each night. It is also developing in the territory controlled by the federal forces where, by the end of February 1969, the number of persons in receipt of ICRC assistance exceeded the million mark.

During the same period 59,000 people were treated by the ICRC medical teams stationed in various places in Nigeria.

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE

At the end of February there were 1,200 people, including 940 members of the Nigerian Red Cross and 260 delegates of the ICRC and international voluntary organizations, engaged in the ICRC relief operation in territory controlled by the Nigerian Federal Government.

Such an undertaking necessitates considerable funds and last November the ICRC drew up a plan which it submitted to 21 National Societies, 34 governments and four large inter-governmental organizations at a meeting in Geneva.¹ The plan covered the four months to the end of February. The ICRC then convened a further meeting, for 17 February, of 16 National Societies and the League, in order to submit them the new relief programme for the six months from 1 March to 31 August 1969. The meeting was chaired by Mr. Jacques Freymond, ICRC Vice-President and was attended also by Mr. Jean Pictet, ICRC member and Director General, and by Mr. August Lindt, ICRC Commissioner General for West Africa. Two days later the ICRC submitted the programme to voluntary agency representatives and, on 21 February, to the heads of donor countries' diplomatic missions to Geneva.

The plan's objectives are to increase:

- a) rations to persons in receipt of ICRC assistance;
- b) medical aid;
- c) distributions to reach a greater number of people on both sides of the front, without any discrimination.

We might point out, by way of conclusion, that whereas nine million Swiss francs monthly were required for the four month programme, the plan for the coming six months budgets for a monthly expenditure of 14 million Swiss francs. This should permit the quantity of relief goods distributed to be stepped up progressively to victims on both sides of the fighting areas.

¹ See *International Review*, December 1968.