

INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS

HELP TO WAR VICTIMS IN NIGERIA

Month by month *International Review* publishes in this section an account of the large scale relief operation being carried out under the sign of the red cross in Nigeria and the secessionist province (Biafra). Our June issue gave details of resources involved and the considerable number of victims being assisted in both Federal and Biafran territory.

Since then events have occurred which have greatly hampered operations. We give below information which goes no further than June 30, in order to meet the deadline for publication.

On the night of June 5 to June 6, a DC-7B, which had been put at the disposal of the International Committee of the Red Cross by the Swedish Red Cross was reported missing.

The plane, which was based at Santa Isabel (on Fernando Poo, Equatorial Guinea) was directed to Uli, in Biafra, carrying relief cargo consisting of food.

The crew was composed of Captain David Brown from the USA, the co-pilot Stig Carlson from Sweden, Kiell Pettersen, the flight engineer, from Norway and the loadmaster Harry Axelsson also from Sweden.

Two days later, the ICRC issued the following press release:

The first results of the inquiry into the loss of an ICRC DC-7B aircraft on the airlift to Biafra reveal that it was shot down by a Nigerian fighter on Thursday evening, June 5th, 1969, at 6.55 p.m. near Eket (35 miles southwest of Calabar in Eastern Nigeria).

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The International Committee of the Red Cross first wishes to pay tribute to the crew who died in the service of the victims of the war and expresses here its very deepest sympathy to their families.

It protests against this action which is as unexpected as it is inexplicable. It has constantly taken the utmost care in avoiding any political position in its mission. Its only concern is to help victims. In this renewed tragedy facing those who have the duty to make the symbol of Red Cross respected, the ICRC appeals to all governments and to public opinion for continued trust and support.

The ICRC expects from the warring parties that they again affirm their will not to do anything which could hamper this rescue operation which has already saved millions of women and children from death.

A further press release on June 27 stated:

The International Committee of the Red Cross, through its delegation in Lagos, has asked the Nigerian authorities to return the two bodies which have been found of the four-man crew of the plane shot down in the region of Eket, S.W. of Calabar, on 5 June by a Nigerian fighter. The plane was operating on the airlift from Santa Isabel (Equatorial Guinea) to Biafra and when shot down was carrying eleven tons of rice for the victims of the war. It came down in flames in the bush and two unidentified bodies were found in the wreck and taken to Lagos. According to the Nigerian government the other two bodies have not been found.

The ICRC has demanded that the two bodies be sent to Geneva by the first available aircraft.

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On June 6, flights to Biafra were suspended, until an Icelandic plane on ICRC service flew two missions to Biafra from Cotonou (Dahomey) on the night of June 10-11, with 25 tons of foodstuffs. The airlift then ceased operating and the ICRC issued the following statement:

Engaged in relief actions on behalf of the civilian populations in the war-stricken areas on both sides of the front in Nigeria, the ICRC

has consistently taken every precaution, in conformity with the rules of conduct established in the course of over a century of experience, against any position of a political character. The ICRC constantly exercises close control over all its operations and consignments and can give every formal assurance that it has never, under any circumstances whatsoever, transported either arms or munitions or any other equipment which—directly or indirectly—could have been used to further the conduct of military operations. Furthermore, the ICRC has taken precise and careful measures to avoid transmission of any information or military intelligence. Hence, it formally denies all and any insinuations whose object it is to pervert the purely humanitarian character of its mission.

Since the outbreak of this conflict, the ICRC's unique aim has been to operate openly, in agreement with the parties to the conflict, in order to ensure satisfactory conditions for the transport and distribution of relief supplies.

That is why the ICRC have never ceased to demand and still demands the authorization to switch their operations from night flights to day-time flights. The ICRC has pursued night flights at its own risk and peril because it felt that it did not have the right to abandon to their fate populations of whom it was the support pending the result of protracted negotiations.

All that the ICRC wish, now as in the past, is that pending peace, the parties to the conflict make the necessary concessions, in order to allow the ICRC to aid and protect the civilian populations from the effects and consequences of the war. In the final analysis, moreover, it remains with the governments to create the necessary climate and conditions propitious to the development of a humanitarian action.

On June 13 the ICRC stated:

The relief operation which the ICRC is conducting in co-operation with National Red Cross Societies and other organizations, and with the financial backing of several states, has so far saved the lives of more than two and a half million innocent victims of the war.

Distribution of relief supplies, however, is not enough. Non-combatants must be protected against the hardship of war. The ICRC

therefore again draws attention to the principles recognized by all nations and embodied in the 1949 Geneva Conventions which today are universal. Those principles require that surrendering combatants shall have their lives spared and shall not be ill-treated, that the wounded shall be cared for, that hospitals and the sign of the red cross shall be respected, that civilian populations shall be spared and not attacked. There again, the ICRC expects instructions to be given, or repeated, that these rules shall be strictly applied in all circumstances. It will be possible thereby to save many human lives.

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We now come to the events which affected in particular the ICRC Commissioner General for West Africa, Mr. August Lindt, against whom the Nigerian press at the end of May launched a campaign.

On June 14, the Nigerian Government declared Mr. Lindt "persona non grata". The ICRC could not accept the accusations against Mr. Lindt and expressed its disapproval in the following terms:

The exclusion decreed against Mr. Lindt by the Federal Government can but provoke profound surprise and deep regret within the ICRC and amongst all those who, so selflessly, assist the civilian populations, victims of the conflict now raging in Nigeria.

Any government is, of course, free to maintain relations with any party it chooses and the International Committee will continue to respect, today as it has done in the past, the sovereign rights of States.

None the less, the members of the International Committee cannot accept the accusations levelled against a man who has never spared either his health, or his efforts and who has performed magnificent work for which the International Committee wishes to express to him here its deepest gratitude.

The ICRC whose teams in the field pursue their daily task unremittingly, hopes that the tensions engendered by this tragic conflict may diminish so that the innocent victims, who are the sole object of its concern, may continue to receive assistance.

NIGERIA

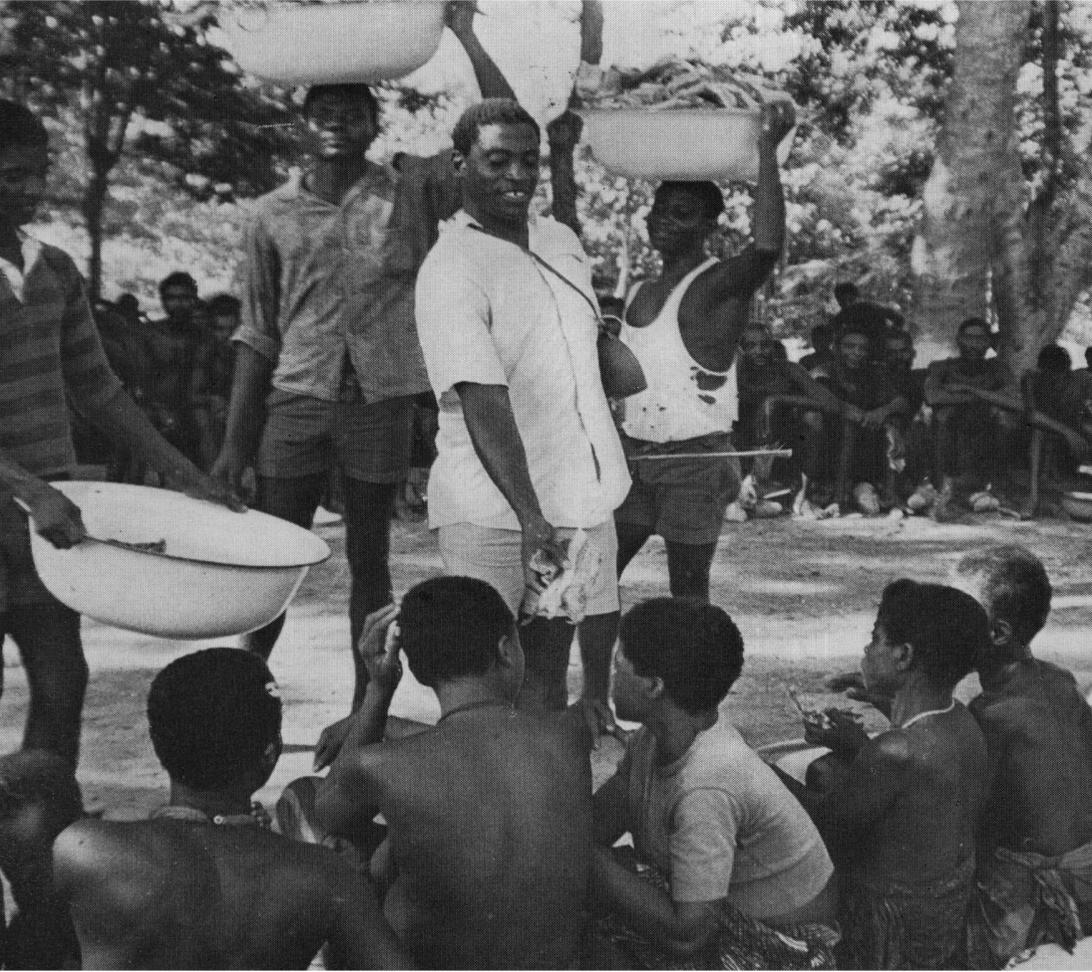


Photo J. Santandréa — May 1969

At Abakaliki : distribution to refugees of dried fish
donated by the Red Cross.



Photo J. Santandréa — May 1969

Refugees at Ezza in Nigeria awaiting distribution of the ICRC food...



... just brought in by lorry.

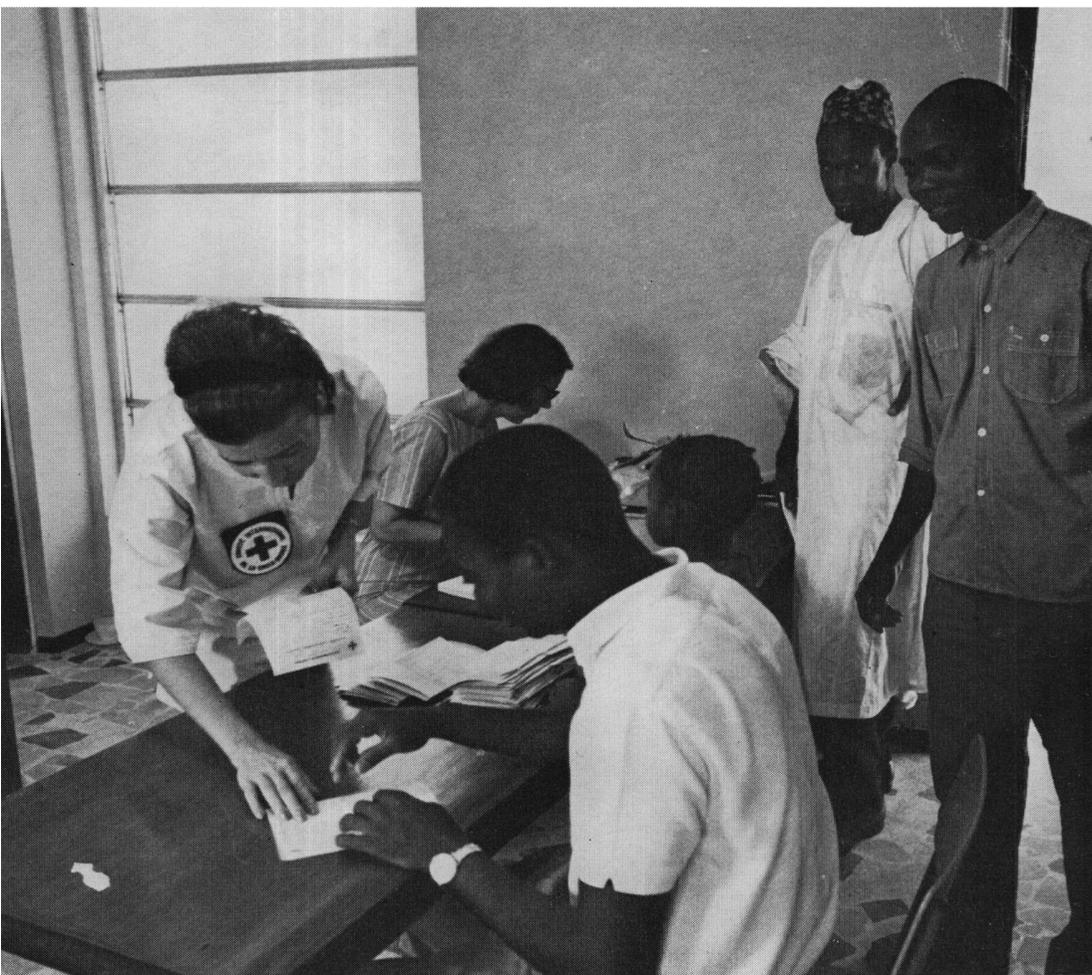


Photo Robin Farquharson — Lagos

Lagos: The ICRC Tracing Service.

On June 19, Mr. August Lindt wrote as follows to Mr. Marcel A. Naville, ICRC President, submitting his resignation:

Dear Mr. President,

When, on 19 July 1968, I replied to the ICRC's request to assume the general executive command of the relief operation for the benefit of victims of the Nigeria|Biafra conflict, I had to build up from very little and time was short. Thanks to the co-operation of governments and institutions, we managed to organize a large-scale programme on both sides of the front in relatively little time.

From the beginning I was aware of the difficulties to be overcome in order to maintain a relationship of confidence with each of the parties in conflict, exacerbated by the bitterness present in all civil wars. I have always endeavoured to draw public attention—directed too much, in my opinion, towards Biafra—to the suffering among the population on the Nigerian side of the front. It was not assistance to governments which was required, but to victims wherever they were and whatever their ethnic origin.

My determination to remain objective was not always appreciated in this conflict where propaganda and psychological warfare play an important part. Our work was therefore the butt of attack sometimes from one party, sometimes from the other, and even from both simultaneously. Nevertheless, co-operation with the civilian and military authorities was always possible and in spite of the many crises and obstacles, the work was supported by men of good will, whose friendship, although not publicly displayed, I shall treasure.

When Count Von Rosen intervened, his exploits considerably changed the situation. First a campaign was launched against me in the Nigerian press; then an ICRC aircraft was shot down without any notification to anybody by the Nigerian government of a change of policy. These events resulted in the Nigerian Federal Government's decision to declare me persona non grata. I shall not dwell on the Nigerian Federal Government's accusations by which it tries to explain its decision. The work achieved is sufficient in itself to exculpate me.

I would however reply to one reproach. In private as in public I have said that the conflict should be resolved by peaceful means. I cannot consider this as a political attitude; it is merely common

sense. I have learned sufficiently to appreciate the negotiating genius of independent Africa to reach the belief that it is able to show the world an example of a pacific and humanitarian settlement of a conflict.

It is not given to me to retreat easily when confronted with obstacles, but the desire I have most at heart is that the relief operations continue. Otherwise, international assistance so far given will only have served to prolong for a few months the lives of hundreds of thousands of children. The cessation of operations would for them mean an inevitable return to famine. As the Nigerian attacks are concentrated on me in person, I consider that I can no longer act as a neutral intermediary in keeping with the ICRC's character, and that were I to remain in office the continuation of operations would be even more difficult.

If, therefore, after thorough reflexion—for it is not easy to withdraw from an operation to which one has devoted all one's strength and energy—I request you, Mr. President, to consider my mandate as ICRC Commissioner General for West Africa as terminated, it is in the hope that my decision, which is irrevocable, will facilitate the continuation of this so essential ICRC programme. I am certain that the living forces of the International Committee of the Red Cross will overcome the difficulties which, as in the past, will arise in the future.

An extraordinary plenary session of the ICRC on Thursday, 19 June, learned with regret of Mr. August Lindt's request to be relieved of the functions which he had discharged over the previous ten months.

Whilst acceding to his request, the ICRC stated how much it regretted that Mr. Lindt was unable to carry on.

Mr. Lindt had acquitted himself of his task with admirable dedication, generosity and impartiality. Thanks to him and the spirit of self-sacrifice with which he had imbued all personnel, millions of human lives had been saved.

The ICRC, which has a responsibility to so many governments, humanitarian institutions and private donors, expressed its profound gratitude to Mr. Lindt and restated its determination to do everything possible to ensure that the relief action may continue.

It appeals to the parties involved in the conflict to see to it that its impartial work of charity meets with no further hindrance.

Then, on 20 June, Mr. Naville, President, and Mr. Jacques Freymond, Vice-President, addressed the following message to Mr. Lindt:

Dear Mr. Ambassador and friend,

Your decision to cease your activities as ICRC Commissioner General for West Africa has caused unanimous regret within the International Committee of the Red Cross.

The operations which you directed in the midst of the conflict causing so much bloodshed in Nigeria, with all the danger, pitfalls and difficulties which occur in a country at war, saved so many lives only thanks to your courage, self-denial and perfect knowledge of the conditions in which the mission had to be carried out. Your qualities as a leader incited the Red Cross teams to extraordinary dedication and steadfast determination to serve our humanitarian cause.

The work of the ICRC during conflict is often misunderstood but, as you know, we have long been accustomed to unpopularity and groundless censure. Your noble personality remained unperturbed, and our confidence in you was thereby strengthened.

Now that there is perhaps a gleam of hope that the belligerents might consider certain arrangements which you have always advocated, it is unfortunate that your so effective intervention may no longer be applied for the benefit of the innocent victims.

As you think your withdrawal may permit the resumption of the humanitarian action, we wish to avail ourselves of this opportunity to assure you that we shall do our utmost to continue the work which you directed, so that your shining contribution to the history of human solidarity shall not be left to tarnish.

All your colleagues of the ICRC shake you warmly by the hand and thank you.

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Actual relief operations could not be continued as previously. From the beginning of June, no flights to Biafra took place except

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the two on the night of 10/11 June, as mentioned above. Whilst relief distribution in federal territory went on unabated at a rate of some 4,000 tons monthly,¹ there were practically no stocks left in Biafra, the authorities of which, on June 18, informed the humanitarian organizations concerned of their agreement under certain conditions to daylight landing at Uli airport with relief to the victims of the Nigerian/Biafran conflict.

The International Committee expressed its satisfaction at the Biafran authorities' consent to daylight flights which it has always preferred and which would help to alleviate the suffering of some 3 million people.

An ICRC press release on June 25 announced that the Committee had contacted the Nigerian and Biafran authorities in order to work out arrangements for the continuation of its relief action:

This should be by air in daylight and by a water-way corridor on the Cross River, as suggested by the U.S. Government.

According to reports from ICRC delegates in Biafra, conditions for the civilian population are deteriorating. Food stocks are exhausted and before another week has passed the hospitals and medical teams will have used up all basic medical supplies.

The ICRC emphasizes that its aircraft are ready to resume operations immediately and that the special craft chartered to ply on the Cross River is already available.

At the end of June the ICRC's food stocks in Nigeria amounted to 25 tons. At Cotonou and Santa Isabel there were several thousands of tons in store, whereas in Biafra itself Red Cross distribution centres have had to close as a result of the cessation of the airlift.

¹ *Plate.* — At Abakaliki: distribution to refugees of dried fish donated by the Red Cross.

Refugees at Ezza awaiting distribution of the food just brought in by lorry.