

## AID TO THE VICTIMS OF THE CIVIL WAR IN NIGERIA

by Jacques Freymond

*With the kind permission of Preuves (Paris, 1st quarter 1970), we give below extracts of an article which summarizes the ICRC's work for the benefit of the victims of the conflict in Nigeria from July 1967 to the last months of 1969.*

*The fighting ceased in January 1970 in the region which made an abortive attempt at secession. In view of the extent of distress, the ICRC at once did all it could to provide relief (Ed.).*

... Why and how did the International Committee of the Red Cross commit itself? The reasons for its commitment were clearly expressed by the Delegate-General of the ICRC for Africa, even before the break was complete between the government of Nigeria and the leaders of the Eastern province. Concluding a report giving an account, at the end of 1966, of the disturbances by which Nigeria had been torn during the year, Mr. Georges Hoffmann—under the title “Disaster relief in case of man-made disaster”—defined the task he wanted the ICRC to undertake: “A holocaust is taking place; there are victims, and care must be given to those who are not dead. As in the case of natural disasters, there must be teams of surgeons, supplies of surgical equipment, medical supplies, food-stuffs and blankets, and there must be means of transport, particularly ambulances and vans”. In short, it was necessary to set up in Geneva, in agreement with the League of Red Cross Societies, an organization which would make it possible to confront those “man-made disasters” similar to the one which the League had already created in Nigeria to deal with natural disasters.

Where were those surgeons and that first-aid to be sent? The situation was too confused and the tensions tormenting the land too numerous for it to be possible at that stage to lay down the lines of action or decide to which zones the medical teams should be allotted.

In the Spring of 1967, the threat of secession became more distinct and with it that of a civil war. Mr. Hoffmann was sent back to Nigeria to make the necessary arrangements with the parties to a possible conflict. For him, as for the members of the Committee, it was a matter of duty. The Nigerians with whom he had to deal, with whom he had so often spoken in past years about the Geneva Conventions and the steps to be taken in the event of civil strife, would, he recalls, have failed to understand if, at the very moment when a serious crisis was emerging, the ICRC were to shirk its duty. The Committee was bound to offer its services as Article 3 of the Conventions enabled it to do.

Thus the ICRC Delegate-General was on the spot at the beginning of July when the war broke out. He was able to obtain in time from the head of the Federal Military Government and from Colonel Ojukwu the assurance that the Geneva Conventions would be applied. He transmitted the information necessary for the despatch, at the outset of the hostilities, of consignments of medical supplies and standard outfits to both parties, and for the mobilization, through the Swiss Red Cross, of two surgical teams.

The decision, as can be seen, was rapid, and its implementation was immediate. We might mention that at the beginning of that same summer of 1967, the ICRC, which has been active for some years in the south of the Arabian peninsula, had to intervene, from one day to another, in the conflict in the Middle East.

But very rapidly the situation in Nigeria became more complicated. The conditions under which the war was taking place, the size of the territory, and the distances to be covered, raised difficult logistical problems. The ICRC, we would emphasize, was not content with simply sending delegates to visit prisoners of war and to satisfy themselves as to the effective application of the Geneva Conventions, a mission which, although traditional, is nevertheless a delicate one at the beginning of a conflict in which the officering of troops leaves much to be desired. From the outset it undertook direct responsibility for care and aid to the wounded,

reinforcing by the despatch of surgical teams the means available to the Nigerian Red Cross. Those teams had to have supplies of dressings, instruments, medical stores and medicines.

Although it was always possible to find the funds necessary for financing the operation<sup>1</sup>, and to recruit the emergency medical teams without delay, there were difficulties in routing men and supplies. Several attempts had to be made. How could they be got across the lines? And how could one communicate with a surgical team or with a delegate in the secessionist zone (Biafra)? It was necessary to use aircraft; this involved expenditure of 80,000 Swiss francs a week and, furthermore, raised a political problem, for the Federal Military Government intended to check the cargo, as it was entitled to do under Article 23 of the IVth Convention, and it only allowed direct flight between Lagos and Port Harcourt<sup>2</sup>, whereas the Biafran government required an intermediate landing on the island of Fernando Po. Finally, the obstacles were removed, and the first ICRC aircraft set down at Port Harcourt on 18 November three surgeons, one anaesthetist and seven tons of medical supplies. The chain of relief was thus established, as were radio communications between Geneva and the secessionist zone.

But for how long? By dragging on, the war changed the size and nature of the problems to be solved on either side of the front. As the Nigerian troops tightened the blockade, the number of displaced persons rose. How many were there? To know that, it would be necessary to be informed of their movements after their flight from the towns and villages. One was thus reduced to depending on estimates based on information which was often contradictory and came from the most varied sources.

But whatever the number of victims or the size of the problem, the ICRC had no longer any choice. It was too deeply committed to back out. Its delegates, struggling with problems of ever increasing difficulty, urged it to widen its action and reinforce the resources committed. UNICEF (the International Children's Fund) offered its help, making available supplies of food and medicine which had to be distributed to the civilian population. The World Council of

---

<sup>1</sup> By 1 September 1967, the ICRC had already allotted nearly 300,000 Swiss francs.

<sup>2</sup> Still in the hands of the secessionist forces.

Churches announced that it was ready to supply medical teams and assistance, and the ICRC accepted those offers of co-operation, thus engaging in a relief operation which was to assume vast proportions.

Did it realize the adventure on which it was embarking? It cannot be said that it did. The position in Nigeria was too unstable, and the news too fragmentary, for the duration of the conflict or its outcome to be foreseen in Geneva—or in Paris, London or Washington. One was therefore forced to feel one's way and adapt oneself to the situation, at the risk of getting one's fingers burnt. That is nothing new in the tradition of the ICRC which, in a century of experience, has learnt to adopt the Napoleonic maxim: start, then see what happens. For a humanitarian institution it is sometimes a duty not to look too far ahead.

As it had been decided to proceed with the task, it was important to secure the bases for it, and in particular to establish clearly with the Lagos government the conditions under which the relief supplies for the civilian population in the secessionist zone could be routed through the blockade. Article 23 of the IVth Convention is quite definite on that point: it lays on the blockading Power an obligation to allow the sending of relief supplies to certain duly defined categories of civilians. But, on the other hand, it gives that Power the right to lay down the technical conditions for that operation—provided, of course, that those technical conditions are not devised in such a way as to jeopardize free access to the territory.

The ICRC therefore negotiated with the Federal Military Government a two-fold agreement, in order to obtain, on the one hand, acceptance of the principle of aid in the form of foodstuffs (milk and vitamins) for children on both sides of the front, and, on the other hand, permission to install an ICRC operational base on neutral territory at Santa Isabel (Equatorial Guinea), where the aircraft were to be checked by a Federal agent before taking off for the secessionist territory. But the affirmative reply of Lagos did not solve the problem; for, as the authorities in that territory refused to agree to Federal checking, the Federal Military Government did not grant permission to fly.

The question then arose again: would it be necessary to abandon the secessionist zone? The Committee could not resolve to do so.

While temporarily withdrawing its surgical team, it left its delegate on the spot, in the hope that new negotiations would lead to a more positive result. That is what did in fact happen. At the beginning of April 1968, it was possible for flights to begin. The Nigerian government gave the ICRC permission to fly at its own risk and peril<sup>1</sup>. Flights, therefore, were allowed on sufferance, and the risks were real, for the ICRC aircraft flew by night like those sent by other humanitarian organisations, but also like those conveying arms, and it was not always possible to identify which was which. Even though the F.M.G. (Federal Military Government) did not at that time have any night-fighters, its anti-aircraft defences were active. The approach to the runway was difficult, particularly during the rainy season. On 30 June, a Super-Constellation crashed on landing. The four members of the crew were killed.

But what was even more serious was that as the fighting became more intense the number of the wounded increased, and so, to a still greater extent, did that of the displaced persons. The Nigerian Red Cross, the efficiency of which was praised by all, could no longer cope with the task. It sent out an appeal to world opinion and soon received the support of the ICRC which declared its intention to co-ordinate relief activities in agreement with the National Society. That task of co-ordination was entrusted to it in July by the Federal Military Government.

On the other side of the front, the situation took a still more drastic turn with the fall of Port Harcourt. By the end of April, the ICRC delegate wrote, there were 500,000 refugees in 600 camps. The capture of Port Harcourt sent over 100,000 more out on the roads and into the bush. With the blockade tightening at the time of the rainy season, famine became a reality from one week to another. A few flights a month were not going to keep alive one to two million people. It was necessary to organize an air-lift, and to do so in the shortest possible time.

---

<sup>1</sup> " . . . if the International Committee of the Red Cross persists in sending supplies by air at their own risk to the rebel-held areas, they may do so. Our Consul in Santa Isabel will be instructed not to examine the Red Cross boxes, in which case the ICRC would be operating entirely on their own. The Federal Military Government assures the ICRC that all possible precautions will be taken to avoid incidents. However, the ICRC is required to issue a statement absolving the Federal Military Government from all responsibility in this regard."

But how could everything be done in time? It was necessary to find funds, competent men, and second-hand air-worthy aircraft; to set up a transport organization which would deliver relief supplies to the operational bases at Lagos and Santa Isabel; to establish storage centres; to organize a fleet of lorries and cars; to co-ordinate the recruiting of the teams sent by the National Societies of the Red Cross and voluntary agencies; to negotiate with the Spanish government the use of Santa Isabel air-field; to pursue unflinchingly with the Federal Military Government and with the government of the secessionist area discussion of the problems of getting through the blockade, studying each of the proposed solutions: river or land corridor, daylight flights, and the use of an airfield exclusively for relief supplies. All that had to be done under pressure from an international public opinion which was impatient of any delay, in an atmosphere of high feeling fed by daily descriptions of the dramatic situation of famished populations moving from place to place according to the ceaseless fluctuations of the fighting.

That was the task undertaken at the end of July 1968 by Ambassador August Lindt, made available to the ICRC by the Swiss government so that he might take up the post of Commissioner-General "with full authority to act as the Committee's representative to governments and governmental or non-governmental institutions" and to organize and lead what some were later to call a "humanitarian expeditionary corps". It was under his direction and impulsion that the operation developed, that the various services became organized, and that relief supplies were brought to the populations on both sides of the front. From September to the end of November, nearly 4,500 tons were sent to the secessionist region alone. That was itself an achievement. More had to be done—but how?

Difficulties kept piling-up. Those connected with finance were at the time so great that the Committee again wondered whether it was going to be able to carry on the task. The staff which had to be recruited hurriedly was by no means always satisfactory. While the teams in the field were working competently and enthusiastically, in spite of difficulties and risks, those in the rear of this expeditionary corps laid themselves open to criticism which was

often justified. The volunteers often behaved like amateurs and dilettantes. "You are lacking in professional experts" wrote one of the heads of the delegation at Lagos at the end of 1968; "this system of recruiting volunteers which, I agree, is necessary, has rather serious drawbacks, in that you will always find adventurers who are worth nothing professionally, and idealists who are certainly worth something as far as their intentions are concerned, but who from the practical point of view are not up to the job". Gradually efforts were made in Geneva and Lagos to forge a more effective instrument. Thanks to the support of the National Red Cross Societies, the voluntary agencies, and governments, it was possible to improve the selection of key-personnel. Arrangements were also made to establish closer relations with the Nigerian Red Cross and to pave the way for withdrawal by the ICRC. The Relief Centre, in which Nigerians held executive positions, was systematically reinforced to that end as from October 1968, and the proportion of "expatriates" was reduced.

To the financial and technical problems inherent in running a large undertaking were added others of a political nature. The Federal Military Government was finding it increasingly difficult to tolerate the night flights. It had not accepted the failure of the negotiations in the summer and autumn of 1968 with a view to starting daylight flights. It considered that the ICRC had forced its hand and was no longer neutral. The sudden stiffening of the resistance of the secessionist zone which had been thought to be at its last gasp resulted in an appreciable intensification of actions aimed at destroying Uli airfield and cutting-off the night flights in that direction.

It was in these circumstances that a new crisis arose. The government of Equatorial Guinea, which had just attained independence, suddenly forbade the continuation of flights in the direction of the secessionist zone from the Santa Isabel base. It took weeks of negotiations to induce it to adopt a more flexible position, and subsequently reverse its decision. The warning was sufficiently serious to cause the ICRC to seek an alternative operational base, which it was able to obtain at the end of January 1969 from the government of Dahomey. On 1 February, the Red Cross aircraft were able to take off from Cotonou, and on the 12th

the flights resumed from Santa Isabel. The crisis ended with an appreciable strengthening of the relief air-lift.

It was high time, for the food situation had grown worse in the secessionist zone, where the ICRC teams were becoming impatient or discouraged. Moreover, the new interruption in aid to the population had been a very serious blow to ICRC prestige.

... But the resumption of the night flights and the rapid intensification of the results of the relief operation, thanks to the existence of two operational bases, gave renewed courage and, to some extent, confidence. At the meeting on 17 February 1969, the representatives of the larger Red Cross Societies gave their consent to a six-month plan of action, the implementation of which was to be kept under review by an advisory committee with which the League of Red Cross Societies and representatives of the National Societies were associated.

The plan, although it set targets which were below the requirements of the civilian populations, nevertheless appeared ambitious. It had to provide aid, if possible, to nearly three million persons on both sides of the front; this meant distributing some 10,000 tons of food and medical supplies a month, of which 4,000 went to the secessionist zone and 6,000 to the territory controlled by the Federal Military Government. That represented a total amount for the six months of some 330 million Swiss francs, of which 84 million was in cash.

Those targets were reached. Thanks to the support of governments, in particular of the American government, and to the support of UNICEF which from the outset supplied the major part of the relief supplies, and that of the voluntary agencies and of the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, the ICRC was able to come to the help of an ever-increasing number of persons (2.6 million at the end of May, of which 1.6 in the secessionist zone). On the Nigerian side, where 5,000 tons were distributed monthly, it proved possible to build-up a reserve of nearly 40,000 tons for use in an emergency. The population in the secessionist zone received 2,000 tons in March, 5,000 in April, and 4,000 in May. A cabled report from the Commissioner-General at the beginning of May summed-up the results achieved:



“ Very satisfactory results of our air-lift—5,000 tons transported April as against 2,000 average previous months—have enabled us increase secessionist zone distribution two ways: 1) by increasing each of the individual rations to make-up for growing scarcity carbo-hydrates; 2) by widening circle beneficiaries which amounted beginning April to some 960,000 and reached some 1,600,000 in week 20.4 to 26.4 divided as follows:

- 510 distribution centres distributed 3 meals a week to 830,000 persons;
- 49 kwashiorkor centres fed completely 4,600 children;
- 490,000 refugees in 745 camps received three meals a week;
- 250,000 refugees not in camps received relief;
- ICRC feeds all civilian and military patients in hospital in Biafra, numbering 20,000 in 44 establishments.

Nigerian side number beneficiaries action remains constant about one million. Teams in regions near front report increase in persons helped. On other hand in certain regions where ICRC has been working for some months (e.g. Enugu) improvement food situation allows change to more selective distribution entailing decrease number beneficiaries ” (4.5.1969).

The situation at the end of June 1969 was as follows: 52,000 tons of relief supplies distributed in the territory controlled by the Federal Military Government since July 1967; 20,000 tons distributed in the secessionist area since 8 April 1968.

But just when the ICRC was feeling that it had overcome the technical obstacles and built up an organization which, in spite of still too many weaknesses, was beginning to produce the right results, a new crisis arose. On 5 June, an aircraft of the Swedish Red Cross operating on the responsibility of the ICRC from the Santa Isabel base was shot down by Nigerian fighters. The four members of the crew were killed. The incident, which was extremely serious since it was a deliberate act against an aircraft protected by the red cross emblem, occurred shortly after the unexpected intervention by the aircraft chartered by Count von Rosen<sup>1</sup>. Von Rosen's raids

---

<sup>1</sup> A Swedish pilot who organized raids against Nigeria on behalf of the secessionist forces.

aroused very high feeling and the resentment to which they gave rise turned against those humanitarian institutions which, by their aid, were helping to prolong the conflict—against those alleged “ neutrals ” which were in fact supporting directly or indirectly the rebels’ war effort. Blame fell on the ICRC and particularly its Commissioner-General, against whom many complaints had been accumulating for months, and who in the end was declared “ persona non grata ”.

What could the Committee do? Protest? It did so, but with moderation, in such a way as not to burn its bridges. Stand by its Commissioner-General whose action had helped to save hundreds of thousands of human lives? August Lindt preferred to retire into the background in order that the work of which he had for a time been the living symbol might be carried on. Resume night flights? But the destruction of a Red Cross aircraft and the comments which followed showed that the ICRC would no longer be allowed to act on sufferance as in the past. Obstinacy on its part would have led to a rupture of which the populations it was supporting in Nigerian territory would have had to bear the consequences. The only solution was to negotiate and attempt once again to obtain from both parties an agreement on daylight flights which the Committee—like those responsible for Joint Church Aid—had been wanting for many months and for which they had never ceased work.

But too much distrust and ill-will had accumulated on both sides. Neither party believed in the neutrality of the Committee which refused to make a choice between the victims and persisted in pleading for the other. An agreement of principle was, it is true, obtained regarding the opening-up of an air-lift. It even proved possible to work out the detailed implementation of a plan which the Committee regarded as feasible. But in October 1969, after four months of continuous negotiation, the aircraft were still at their bases at Cotonou and Santa Isabel awaiting the order to take off. Meanwhile Joint Church Aid and the French Red Cross went on with their operations, thus helping to limit the effects of the blockade.

In Nigeria, on the other hand, the ICRC pursued its activities within a limited framework, in conformity with the provisions of the IVth Convention. Although it had been officially informed on

30 June that its rôle as a co-ordinator was ended, it continued its work—actually, at the request of the Nigerian authorities and Red Cross—so as to ensure, in the interest of the population receiving aid, continuity of action. It was only on 30 September that the Nigerian Red Cross again took over the conduct of operations, with the co-operation of the specialists whom the Committee had been requested to make available to co-ordinate the routing of relief supplies.

This brief account of one of the crises in which the ICRC was involved in the past few years has sometimes thrown a harsh light on its weaknesses and the limits of its possibilities. But the balance-sheet of its activities in Nigeria and Biafra nevertheless shows a credit—and not only on account of the amount of the relief supplies distributed and the number of persons helped; the value of a humanitarian action cannot be assessed solely on the basis of statistics, however impressive these may be.

On the credit side we would first set the speed with which action was taken, when all that the ICRC had on the spot was one delegate unsupported by any infrastructure. That speed derives from the very character of the International Committee and the fact that it is unencumbered by the mortgages with which multi-nationality burdens other international institutions. The ICRC is not dependent on any government—not even on the Swiss government, with regard to which it observes a real independence which the Federal Council is anxious to respect. It does not represent the interests of any nation or of any class. It took up the tasks in Nigeria in the same way as everywhere else—Hungary, the Congo, the Yemen, the Middle East. In this case, as in all the others, it considered only the interests of the victims, and, in taking the initial decision, obeyed only the dictates of its conscience.

On the credit side, too, is the setting-up of an international relief organization on a quite impressive scale, even if it did take some time to produce adequate results. But those who, at times somewhat complacently, pointed to its shortcomings and even proposed that the U.N. should in future assume responsibility for those relief operations, have not always realized that the main obstacles to be overcome were not so much technical or financial as political. It is necessary to have experienced at first hand the

daily struggles of the institution and to have participated in the assessments of the situation and the process of decision-making in order to be able to gauge both the obdurate nature of the political obstacle and the limited possibilities open to governments. The fact is that the U.N. did not have authority to intervene in an internal conflict, whereas the ICRC, which did not have to concern itself with the secessionist zone's status, could act on the basis of Article 3 of the Conventions, provided the parties to the conflict accepted it: which they did.

As for the "humanitarian expeditionary corps" formed by the ICRC with the spontaneous support of organizations of all kinds and of governments—in the end it worked, and that is what counted. A valuable experiment was carried out, the lessons of which should be taken to heart should other crises arise.

Also on the credit side is the tenacity with which the undertaking was pursued in spite of repeated crises and a series of setbacks. That tenacity was not the attribute of just one man, nor was it exclusive to the Nigerian operation. Once the ICRC has committed itself to a cause it believes to be just, and on a basis it regards as valid, it is bound to pursue its action for as long as it judges necessary. Many are the governments which have had experience of that frequently irritating obstinacy in the past, and which will have it in the future.

But that tenacity, and that intransigence which we consider necessary, must be contained by certain rules. The ICRC, even if it reserves for itself a right of initiative, must base itself on the Geneva Conventions. It cannot ignore that body of rules which it itself helped to establish and for which it demands respect from States. Hence the limits set to its action in the secessionist zone—limits which an organization *ad hoc* like Joint Church Aid could permit itself to ignore, but which any international institution intending to work on a continuing basis owes it to itself to observe.

That does not mean that we questioned the value of the action conducted with success by Joint Church Aid and by so many other organizations which concerned themselves with helping the civilian population of Biafra. Experience going back long before the Nigerian crisis has proved the work of those "humanitarian campaigners". The Committee is well aware that it is thanks to

action often fraught with risk and regarded by some as a challenge that humanitarian law has progressed. A certain division of labour has always been necessary, as the Nigerian crisis has perhaps shown even more clearly than before. Just as the ICRC fulfilled a task which the U.N. was not in a position to undertake, so Joint Church Aid, by its participation, made a contribution which the ICRC could not give, and if that organization were one day to find itself unable to carry on the work, perhaps the ICRC might be in a position to take over. It is thus not a matter of praising the merits of one more than another, nor of claiming a monopoly of good deeds. What counts in this world of passion and violence is, through this permanent struggle to save lives, the instilment in all who possess a particle of power of respect for human dignity.

**Jacques FREYMOND**  
Vice-President of the ICRC