

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE ENDS ITS MISSION IN NIGERIA

The civil war in Nigeria is now ended. That does not mean, however, that this gloomy page of African history has been turned. The secessionist zone enclave being cut off from the outside world, the effect of the war on the civilian population was particularly deadly.

From the outset both parties recognized the ICRC's role as a neutral intermediary and assured it of their determination to respect the Geneva Conventions. For the first time in Africa, the Federal Military Government drew up and issued to the troops a code of conduct based on the principles of those Conventions.

As early as July 1967 and throughout the conflict the ICRC worked in the territories of both parties to the war to carry out the duties incumbent on it under the Geneva Conventions: prisoners of war were visited; hundreds of personal messages were forwarded from one side of the front to the other through the Central Tracing Agency; the wounded and sick on both sides were given medical care.

Concomitantly, going beyond the normal scope of its duties under the Geneva Conventions, the ICRC set up one of the largest relief organizations in Red Cross history. This was made necessary by the growing needs in food and medical supplies of the civilian populations. The operations developed in spite of difficulties, thanks to the assistance of governments, National Red Cross Societies, governmental and private agencies and a great number of individual donations. In this respect the ICRC makes a point of expressing its gratitude to all who co-operated in its action, and of paying tribute to the delegates and pilots who lost their lives whilst on operations.

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No less than 120,000 tons of foodstuffs and medical supplies were provided by the ICRC; 91,000 tons in Federal territory—particularly in those regions near the fighting areas where refugees and war victims were numerous—and 29,000 tons in the former secessionist area. The relief consisted of foodstuffs, medical supplies and equipment to a value of almost 500 million Swiss francs. Expenses for personnel—delegates, doctors, specialists, local employees and labourers, numbering at one time as many as 1,820—amounted to almost 50 million francs.

This personnel was essential for the forwarding and distribution of supplies, for the smooth operation of the ICRC's medical programme and for the running of hospitals set up by the International Committee in the stricken region and which continued their work throughout.

These efforts as a whole provided daily assistance through 909 distribution centres to almost a million people in federal territory and almost a million and a half in the secessionist area.

To carry out the medical programme, consistent with the First Geneva Convention, the ICRC, as early as the summer of 1967, sent surgical teams to both sides of the front. By the end of June 1969 it was co-ordinating the work of 45 medical teams on loan from various charitable agencies and National Red Cross Societies. It set up five hospitals, an orthopaedic workshop and 53 sickbays. With assistance from local Red Cross sections, its vaccination campaign had, by the beginning of 1970, enabled 2,524,411 persons to be inoculated against smallpox, 893,131 against measles and 246,586 against tuberculosis.

In June 1969, for reasons which it is not for the ICRC to judge, the Federal Military Government's attitude changed. Following the shooting down of a Swedish aircraft on a mercy flight under ICRC control and responsibility, and when the Nigerian Government no longer tolerated night flights to the former secessionist area, the International Committee decided to discontinue its night airlift.

Being bound by the Geneva Conventions and as it was also working for the benefit of the population in territory under federal control, the ICRC had no alternative but to negotiate with both

parties to try to reach an agreement on an airlift during daylight. Unfortunately the belligerents could not agree on practical arrangements for such flights.

On 30 June 1969 the Federal Military Government decided to transfer from the ICRC to a government body in liaison with the Nigerian Red Cross the role of co-ordinator for relief actions in federal territory. Thanks to large scale technical assistance which had been provided for several years by Scandinavian Red Cross Societies, the Nigerian Red Cross was able to work throughout the whole territory.

At the request of the Nigerian authorities, however, the transfer took place only on 30 September 1969. The ICRC then handed over to the Nigerian Red Cross almost 20,000 tons of equipment and stores stocked near the front, inter alia at Enugu, Calabar, Port Harcourt and Koko. It also handed over medical supplies and loaned 98 vehicles, ships, inflatable warehouses and a fully equipped radio network.

During the transitional period from 30 June to 30 September 1969, and even beyond that date, the ICRC drew on its reserves to assume the financing of relief actions which had fallen to the Nigerian Red Cross which had practically no funds of its own. Thanks to these transfers and the technical and financial assistance given the Nigerian Red Cross during the transitional period, the National Society was not without resources during the final months of the war and when the resistance of the former secessionist zone collapsed.

The Red Cross in the secessionist area, moreover, was reintegrated into the National Society, and this lightened the task.

When the collapse came, the ICRC, thanks to the aircraft it had kept operational for that purpose, was ready to forward to the stricken region some 6,000 tons of foodstuffs and medical supplies stocked at Cotonou. This final operation seemed the more essential as it had to alleviate the suffering of victims during the hiatus between the breakdown of organised relief distribution in the former secessionist area and the arrival of emergency relief after hostilities.

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The Federal Military Government having decreed that all relief and reconstruction operations should be in Nigerian hands and, in particular, co-ordinated by the Ministry of Economic Development, the ICRC's further efforts came up against various obstacles which the Federal Military Government agreed to remove only for a few flights to take medical supplies and food-stuffs and, in one flight, to evacuate some serious casualties to Kaduna. It should be pointed out that, jointly with the League of Red Cross Societies, the ICRC had, the day following the end of hostilities, submitted to the Nigerian authorities and Red Cross an offer of assistance and co-operation and of ICRC transport potential.

However, simultaneously with its new proposals, the ICRC placed on record that the cessation of hostilities should be followed by its gradual withdrawal as a neutral organization within the meaning of the Geneva Conventions, as its presence would no longer be required.

This fact and the observation that its intervention was no longer considered indispensable led the International Committee of the Red Cross to decide to withdraw. It is now for the Nigerian authorities and Red Cross to complete the work of assistance to the tens of thousands of people still in need.