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NSC INTERDEPARTMENTAL GROUP
FOR AFRICA

BACKGROUND PAPER ON NIGERIA/BIAFRA

THE WAR:

The Nigerian Federation united three major ethnic groups and about 250 smaller ones. From British colonial tutelage, it developed reasonably workable political cohesion and decidedly promising economic prospects through five years of independence. But the corruption and indecisiveness of first generation politicians triggered a coup in 1966 by young army officers, mostly Ibos from Eastern Nigeria. The tribal implications of that coup triggered in turn a sequence of assassinations, tribal atrocities and polarization culminating in Eastern Nigeria's secession as "Biafra" and the outbreak of war 19 months ago. The war is now stalemated with Federal Military Government (FMG) troops surrounding a 7,000 square mile Biafran enclave, or about 1/4 the 30,000 square miles the rebels began with. The enclave contains 5 to 7 million people. Despite Federal military superiority in men and materiel, there is very little prospect that either side, by itself, can win militarily in the next six months unless Biafra's arms supply is cut off.

THE TWO SIDES are fighting a total war and subordinate humanitarian to political objectives. Moreover, mutual tribal enmities complicate and embitter the political issues.

FMG: General Gowon leads a fragile, relatively moderate and regionally balanced coalition, determined to preserve national unity and convinced that rebel success would tear apart the country. The military stalemate accentuates inner stresses and strains (tax riots, tribal dissidence, increasing war-weariness), but the common interest nevertheless continues to hold the coalition together. A prolonged stalemate or ceasefire could well result in the replacement of the present moderate leadership by military leaders who would be proponents of a ruthless, all out military victory and less concerned about international opinion.

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In the eyes of the Nigerian public, the international (predominantly white) relief operation helps to keep the rebellion alive through food deliveries and the cover its relief flights provide for arms flights. There is some popular sentiment for expelling it on the Federal side, but the FMG, conscious of international implications and its own need, has thus far cooperated reasonably well with the relief efforts in its own area. It has also reluctantly acquiesced in the night relief flights into Biafra. Yet mounting frustration and incipient xenophobia threaten to make the relief effort a scapegoat for FMG military failure. There are some on the Federal side who would not be averse to winning by starvation.

BIAFRA: Ojukwu has the strong support of a people (1) whose morale appears high, (2) who are determined to win self-determination or independence, and (3) who are convinced--with some past justification--that unconditional military defeat by the Federal forces could mean genocide. The Biafran leaders have successfully--if cynically--exploited the issue of starvation to win political sympathy abroad. They believe time is on their side and that either (a) the FMG coalition will collapse or (b) outside sympathy for their plight will bring about a solution favorable to them.

NEGOTIATING POSITIONS:

The FMG insists on one Nigeria and has announced guarantees for the survival of the Ibos and their integration into national life. The present government is unlikely to survive a truce or an unconditional cease-fire which only prolongs rebellion.

Biafra insists her sovereignty is not negotiable, dismisses the FMG offer of guarantees as not credible, and proposes an unconditional cease-fire that would facilitate relief measures. However, this would also permit military resupply and further strain the FMG coalition. Ojukwu speaks of a possible "commonwealth" relationship implying a degree of independence unacceptable to the FMG.

In short, the positions of the two sides appear irreconcilable.

THE MINORITY PROBLEM:

The loyalties of Biafran minority tribes appear to be sharply divided. Even before secession, the area claimed by Biafra had long been dominated by the Ibos, comprising about 65 percent of the total population, with non-Ibo tribes, heavily predominant along the eastern border and oil rich southern coast, comprising the other 35 percent. Elements of these minority tribes, even before secession, resented Ibo domination. Many of them opposed secession; others supported it. Some cooperated fully with the Biafran regime after secession. Others fled to Federal held areas and remained firmly loyal to the Federal cause. When Federal troops occupied the minority areas, the population in most cases welcomed them. Others, however, withdrew with Biafran forces into Iboland and have adhered to the rebel regime. Minority tribesmen hold high positions in both the FMG and the rebel regime.

The FMG charges that Ojukwu has attempted to hold the minority tribes against their will, and cite as evidence that they welcomed FMG troops and that some minority leaders are imprisoned by the Ibos. It also charges that Ojukwu is determined to keep these areas because of their oil resources and his need for an outlet to the sea to make a viable Biafran state. In rebuttal, Ojukwu has suggested an internationally-sponsored plebiscite in the minority areas to establish their loyalty. Such a plebiscite would presumably require a withdrawal of FMG troops to prewar boundaries, which the FMG has firmly rejected.

THE ISSUE OF GENOCIDE:

If the FMG overruns Biafra, at least some excesses against the Ibos are inevitable. However, the reports of the international observers have stated that there is no evidence that the FMG is pursuing a policy of genocide. But there are historical reasons (perhaps as many as 30,000 Ibos slaughtered in Northern Nigeria in 1966 before the civil war began) for Ibo fears. Moreover, uncertainties regarding rank and file discipline in the Federal army qualifies FMG official assurances and creates a potential for undisciplined excesses if the war is concluded by military means.

THE POLITICS OF RELIEF:

About 850,000 people on the Federal side, virtually all who can be reached, are being fed by the international relief effort. As supplies pass entirely through FMG-controlled territory, problems of delivery are of quite a different nature than those applicable to Biafra, where all supplies, arms as well as relief, must pass over or through Federal territory. About two million people in Biafra depend on night-time airlifts operated by the religious voluntary agencies from the Portuguese island of Sao Tome and by the ICRC (Red Cross) from, until very recently, the island of Fernando Po, and now from Cotonou, Dahomey. Deliveries could be increased substantially by either daylight flights or a surface corridor into Biafra.

The FMG opposition to night flights, in which it has acquiesced in the past, is hardening because of arms flights tailgating relief planes into Biafra for protection. It has endorsed the principle of both daylight flights and a land corridor into Biafra with outside supervision to avoid military violation by either party. But it insists that: (a) the relief airlift should be inspected for arms and (b) the land corridor not interfere with military operations. FMG suspicions of all foreign relief agencies are growing. It prefers that all international relief to Biafra be channeled through Nigerian territory.

Biafra refuses daytime flights into its one working airstrip for fear FMG aircraft will tailgate to the airfield. Biafra also values the protection given nighttime arms flights by the intermix with relief flights which the FMG is either reluctant or unable to interdict. It has thus far opposed (or countered with proposals unacceptable to the FMG) every land corridor proposed by the FMG on the grounds that it would be militarily exploited by the FMG and that the food might be poisoned.

Both sides have obstructed relief, but on balance, the FMG has indicated more flexibility in its willingness to consider alternate relief routes and possibilities than have the Biafrans. The beleaguered Biafrans give priority to arms shipments over relief and they also know the suffering is a political asset.

THE RELIEF AGENCIES:

The ICRC conducts the bulk of the relief operation on the Federal side and a sizeable share in Biafra. Because of its policy of operating on both sides, and since on occasion it has acted with the consent or acquiescence of only one side, it has become a frequent victim of attack by one side or the other, with no real leverage on either.

Religious voluntary agencies (some U.S.-some European) have little or no leverage on the FMG because of the latter's belief that their sympathies are with the Biafrans, among whom the percentage of Christians is higher than in the rest of Nigeria. They have been reluctant to press the Biafrans to accept daylight flights or corridors because (a) their airlift from Sao Tome is operating well and they do not want to jeopardize it; and (b) some of the participants, at least, share the view of the Biafran leadership that such arrangements would work to the political or military disadvantage of Biafra.

INVOLVEMENT OF OTHER POWERS:

The British back the FMG with non-sophisticated arms sales. But Wilson is under heavy parliamentary and public pressure to stop. They have tried often and in vain to get serious negotiations started. The British will probably continue cautious support of the FMG, but will want to appear active diplomatically to mitigate parliamentary criticism. They have only marginal leverage with the FMG despite their arms supply--virtually none with the Biafrans.

The Soviets became major arms suppliers to the FMG at the outset of the war when the US embargoed arms to both sides and the British hesitated. The FMG gives frequent assurances that the Soviet involvement is only a matter of wartime necessity and portends no political realignment of Nigeria's traditional pro-Western stance. We have no evidence that the FMG has thus far granted any significant political concessions in return for Soviet arms. However, Soviet prestige and acceptance has increased.

Soviet intentions are unclear. They probably consider Nigeria a target of opportunity to extend their influence at Western expense and relatively little cost to themselves. Whether requested or not, they have not gone beyond the

provision of military equipment, including aircraft and the training of pilots. Although disappointed--and perhaps somewhat embarrassed--at slow FMG military progress, they appear willing to continue their support in the belief that prolonged fighting and FMG frustrations will increase the political value of their help.

The French decision to supply arms clandestinely to Biafra probably saved the rebellion when it appeared near defeat last summer and continues to sustain it. De Gaulle's motives are mixed, but he is probably influenced by the possibility of the breaking up of an Anglophone federation which could have exerted a powerful influence in a West Africa in which French interests are so strong. There are also indications that French oil interests are supporting Biafra in the hope of acquiring British and American concessions in the Federally-held but Biafran-claimed minority coastal areas. So far, the French have stopped short of outright recognition. They deny giving arms. We simply do not know how far the French are prepared to go in support of Biafran independence.

The Africans see Nigeria's situation as a manifestation of the problem facing most governments on a continent where colonial boundaries enclosed, usually arbitrarily, almost two thousand ethnic groups in 41 states. In the Organization of African Unity (OAU), all but four members (Ivory Coast, Gabon, Tanzania, Zambia, which recognized Biafra in 1968) support the FMG and regard the civil war as an internal question which should be solved within an African (OAU) framework. The OAU summit resolution, which passed by a vote of 33-4 in September 1968, appealed to the Biafran leaders to cooperate in restoring peace and unity in Nigeria and called upon all members of the UN to avoid any action "detrimental to the peace, unity and territorial integrity of Nigeria." It also created an OAU Consultative Committee of six African heads of state, which is headed by Emperor Haile Selassie, to assist in bringing about a negotiated settlement. This committee has twice been successful in bringing the two parties together to discuss a political settlement and arrangements for relief corridors into Biafra. The meetings produced no positive results, but there are indications that a further effort will be made by the committee. Meanwhile, the Common Organization of African and Malagasy States (the Francophone nations) has recently decided to make a further African effort which they are trying to keep unpublicized.

Neither together nor separately do the Africans have decisive leverage. The four states recognizing Biafra are important to the morale of the rebellion, and in the case of the Ivory Coast and Gabon, provide a nearby base for arms deliveries. OAU support is important as a morale factor for the FMG. But precisely because of that support, the OAU has little negotiating leverage with the Biafrans. However, Africans generally attach importance to the settlement of the problem in an African context. Moreover, their cooperation and participation with forces are likely to be a vital factor in any peacekeeping operations.

The UN: The membership has generally deferred to the views of the OAU in regarding the war as an internal Nigerian and African problem. U Thant has made clear he sees no role for the UN under present circumstances, other than participation by UNICEF and other specialized agencies in the relief effort. Thus far there has not appeared to be sufficient support among UN members for useful consideration in that forum.

THE ROLE OF THE U.S.: Except for our deep concern regarding humanitarian relief, we have regarded the civil war as primarily a Nigerian and African problem. We have: (a) continued to recognize the FMG; (b) imposed an arms embargo on both sides; (c) contributed to the international relief effort (\$30 million publicly and privately, approximately 60 percent of the total, plus eight Stratofreighter aircraft); and (d) voiced political support for a negotiated settlement in the context of one Nigeria with workable safeguards for Ibo protection. We have looked to (1) the OAU, the British and the Commonwealth Secretariat to take the lead in peace-making, with active encouragement from us both publicly and privately, and (2) the ICRC (together with the religious voluntary agencies in Biafra) and the OAU to take the lead in the negotiation and operation of relief arrangements, with our active moral, diplomatic and material support.

The humanitarian motivation behind our relief efforts is increasingly questioned by the Nigerians, who, in a situation of total war, find it more and more difficult to differentiate between humanitarian relief and political support. They deeply fear that under public pressures we are shifting to an increasingly pro-Biafran position that may have a decisive influence on the outcome of the war. The counterpart of these Nigerian fears are the Biafran hopes that US and other western humanitarian concern will result in political and arms support and eventual victory.

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APPENDIX TO "BACKGROUND PAPER ON NIGERIA/BIAFRA"

Subject: Congressional Aspects of Nigeria/Biafra Relief

RESOLUTIONS

There is sharp and growing Congressional interest in the Nigeria/Biafra situation. On January 22, with 59 co-sponsors, Senator Pearson (R-Kansas) introduced a well-publicized concurrent resolution calling on the President "to increase significantly the amount of surplus food stocks, relief monies, non-combat aircraft, and such other vehicles of transportation as may be necessary for relief purposes." These supplies are to be made available to and at the request of the OAU, UNICEF, ICRC, and other suitable agencies operating in the area "with the consent of the responsible authorities." The USG is also asked to seek the cooperation of other nations. The following day in the House 101 members co-sponsored the introduction of six identical resolutions. The majority of statements in the Senate and the House, all of which supported the introduction of the resolutions, show a primary interest in increasing markedly US relief assistance. Statements in the House were particularly noteworthy in urging against political involvement.

A group of Democrats, headed by Senator Kennedy (D-Mass.), while supporting the resolution, is critical of its narrow focus on relief. Senator Kennedy states that since the conflict already involves Great Powers, the US has the moral duty, as a world leader, to bring about a solution. He is critical of USG deference toward the FMG and of the lack of our "sense of urgency" about the problem. In contrast, Senator Brooke (R-Mass.), warning against US involvement, argued that the Nigerian situation is an example of the limitations on US power. The US can neither determine a settlement of the war nor impose a cease-fire.

On January 31 Senator Dodd (D-Conn.) and 15 colleagues introduced another resolution which not only called for increased relief efforts, but stated that the US "should lend its good offices and utilize all of its diplomatic resources for the purpose of bringing about an immediate cease-fire between the Nigerian and Biafran forces and thereafter to promote the conclusion of a just and durable settlement of the Biafran conflict." The settlement should provide for some form of continuing economic integration.

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Trips to Nigeria/Biafra

A number of members have made or are planning trips to the war area. In December 1968 Congressman Lukens (R-Ohio) visited Lagos and Biafra. At about the same time Congressman Lowenstein (D-N.Y.) visited both sides and then met with Emperor Haile Selassie and officials of the British Foreign Office. Lowenstein has now returned for a second time to both sides, his visit coinciding with that of Senator Goodell (R-N.Y.) and a small staff. On February 7 Congressman Diggs (D-Michigan), Chairman-Designate of the Subcommittee on Africa, House Foreign Affairs Committee, accompanied by Congressman Wolff (D-N.Y.) and Burke (R-Fla.) departed to visit both sides.

Biafra Lobby

The lobby, whose supporters embrace disparate political elements, is a conglomerate of American religious and charitable organizations, ad hoc groups composed largely of students and returned Peace Corps volunteers and Biafran students in the U.S. The motives of the supporters range from humanitarian concern alone to more political involvement extending to official recognition of Biafra. Aided by a highly effective public relations effort and the skillful presentation of the starvation theme, it has been most successful in mobilizing an influential segment of American public opinion and enjoys widespread access to the Congress. The main result of its activities has been to increase greatly the public demand for an increased flow of relief supplies to Biafra and a growing tendency to promote a political stand openly favorable to the Biafrans and US recognition.

Mail to the Congress has been extremely heavy, and the Department of State has answered more than 550 Congressional inquiries on the problem since July 1, 1968. The Nigerian Government has been much less effective in gathering public support in the United States, but nevertheless has sympathizers of its own on Capital Hill.

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