

# Reactions of the Governments of Nigeria and Biafra to the Role of the Catholic Church in the Nigeria–Biafra War

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The high incidence of conflict in the world today, and the overwhelming influence of religion on man and his society, have resulted in an increasing engagement of religion in conflict management. However, in spite of its high profile in managing conflict, religion can sometimes form a barrier to conflict resolution. The Nigeria–Biafra war was one of those wars in which religion, as an instrument of conflict management, played a double-edged sword. This paper examines the reaction of the parties to this conflict to the role of the Catholic Church in managing the conflict.

The involvement of the Catholic Church in the Nigeria–Biafra war has ever remained one of the highly controversial themes of this war. While the role played by the church appeared to be a welcome development on the part of the Biafran Government, the Federal Military Government of Nigeria (FMG) was against the church and its activities, particularly its relief programme in Biafra during the war. From the available evidence, the church's relief services, just like those of the International Committee of the Red Cross, were carried out on both sides of the war. The difference was on the level of dependence on it, as well as the degree of its exploitation by the two parties. In addition to its high dependence on the Caritas airlift, the Biafran Government, in its war of propaganda hinged on religion, was out to exploit every available opportunity provided by the church's relief programme in Biafra. It therefore made its overtures of 'friendship' to the church in Biafra and beyond as it assumed the status of a 'maligned child' of the mother church. To the FMG that was out to crush a rebellion, such manipulation of religion, using the platform of the church's programme of relief in Biafra was more than a frustration of its war effort. Its anger was thus directed against the church both locally and internationally such that the latter, among other things, could achieve little or nothing in terms of conflict

resolution, although the relief programme of the church in general saved the Biafran population from a war in which starvation was obviously an instrument.

**KEYWORDS** Catholic Church, Governments, Nigerian Civil War, Biafra, relief services

## Introduction

The Nigeria–Biafra War (1967–1970), which was between the former Eastern Region declared as Biafra on 30 May 1957 and the rest of Nigeria, was one of the major wars in the continent following the withdrawal of the vestiges of colonial rule.<sup>1</sup> The nature of this war, and the religious composition of Federal Nigeria and Biafra, explain, to a large extent, the involvement of humanitarian groups, especially the religious bodies, in it.<sup>2</sup> The war was not just protracted, it also generated one of the most critical and complex emergencies in Africa that attracted the attention of humanitarian groups. The Catholic Church was one of the religious groups that played an active role in the management of the crisis generated by this conflict.<sup>3</sup> Its involvement threw up some reactions from the two sides to the conflict, depending on the perception of each party. To the Federal Military Government (FMG) that was out to crush a rebellion, the involvement of the Catholic Church prolonged the war and caused more suffering to Nigerians and the secessionist group.<sup>4</sup> Unlike the FMG, the Biafran Government appeared to have welcomed and approved the role performed by the Church during the crisis.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the involvement of the Church in the war has remained a subject of controversy ever since. This paper does not claim to provide an end to this controversy or debate. The aim of the study is to provide some clues to the root of the controversy by examining the reactions of the two parties to the role of the Church during this war.

Several works, no doubt, have appeared on the Nigeria–Biafra War. Most of these centre on the causes and nature of the war, the post-war reconstruction and rehabilitation programme, foreign involvement, the press, and women.<sup>6</sup> There are also a

<sup>1</sup> K. Kende, *Local Wars in Africa, Asia and Latin America 1945–1969*, Publication Series of the Centre For African Research of the Hungarian Academy of Science, 1972.

<sup>2</sup> Of about 19,207,143 Christians in Nigeria as of 1963, 9,573,622 were from the east. Forty-five per cent of this number was of Catholic denomination. Well below fifty per cent of the Igbo Christians were protestants. See Nigerian Year Book-1968, Lagos: Time Press.

<sup>3</sup> Jacinta Nwaka, 'The Catholic Church and Conflict Management During the Nigerian Civil', War, PhD Dissertation, Department of History, University of Ibadan, 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Information (FMI), Press Release, No. F. 300 1.e.f 26th Nov. 1968.

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Obiukwu, Biafran army chaplain interviewed, Onitsha 24 June 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Some works on these themes are: E. Osaghae, et al., eds., *The Nigerian Civil War and its Aftermath* (Ibadan: Petraf, 2002); P. Obi-Ani, *Post-Civil War Social and Economic Reconstruction of Igboland 1970–1983* (Enugu: Mikon, 1998); O. Obasanjo, *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War 1967–1970* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1980); E. Uchendu, *Women and Conflict in Nigerian Civil War* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2007); J. C. Nwaka, 'Biafran Women and the Nigerian Civil War: Challenges and Survival Strategies', *African Peace and Conflict Journal*, 4 (1) (2011), 34–46; Eno Ikpe', Migration, Starvation and Humanitarian Intervention during the Nigerian Civil War', *The Lagos Historical Review*, 27 (2001), 82–93.

few works on relief services during and after the war.<sup>7</sup> However, the observation made by Osuntokun, some years back, that most of the works on the Nigeria–Biafra war were by non-professionals still applies, given the available scholarly works on the war today.<sup>8</sup> One of the gaps yet to be filled is the involvement of the Catholic Church in this war.<sup>9</sup> It is on this note that this article examines the reactions of the two conflict parties to the involvement of the Catholic Church in the war. For a clear understanding of the parties' reactions to the role of the Church, a brief discussion of that role is necessary. Hence, issues in this paper are discussed under three major headings: activities of the Church during the war, reactions from Federal Nigeria, and the reactions of the Biafran Government.

### Activities of the Church during the war

Beginning with the 1966 crisis, which eventually metamorphosed into a civil war, the Catholic Church involved itself in a number of humanitarian activities on the Federal Nigerian side. The most outstanding of these was cash grants (foreign and local currencies) and relief supplies to affected Nigerians through the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN). This was intensified with the outbreak of the war. In addition to collections generated locally from churches, Catholic relief agencies raised funds from governmental and non-governmental bodies internationally with which they assisted the victims of war. Outstanding among these agencies were Caritas International, the Catholic Relief Service (CRS), and Misereor. The first outstanding donation amounting to nine thousand (9000) pounds came from Caritas International.<sup>10</sup> This was used to purchase lorries for the Nigerian Red Cross.<sup>11</sup> The total grants from Caritas, the CRS, and Misereor, through the CSN from June 1968 to August 1970, was £1,026, 959.<sup>12</sup>

In addition to the grants provided, relief agencies sent equipment and food items for the victims of this war. The CRS, for instance, donated in 1969, forty new Peugeot cars with petrol allowance. In one of the consignments sent by Caritas, there were five tons of milk, five tons of grain and half a ton of pharmaceutical drugs for the Nigerian Armed Forces Medical stores.<sup>13</sup> Also, in August 1968, seventy-five tons of rice from Misereor was sent to the Red Cross through the CSN. By the end

<sup>7</sup> Among them are: E. Urhobo, *Relief Operation in the Nigerian Civil War* (Ibadan: Daystar, 1978); N. Obiaga, *The Politics of Humanitarian Intervention in the Nigerian Civil War* (Trenton: Africa World Press, 2004); N. Goetz, *Humanitarian Issues in the Biafran Conflict* (Geneva: np, 2000); J. Ojinta, *The Dearth of Biafra* (Enugu: SNAAP Press, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Jide Osuntokun, 'Review of Literature on the Nigerian Civil War', in *Nigeria Since Independence: The First twenty-Five Years Vol. vi, The Civil War Years*, ed. by C. Tamuno and S/ Ukpabi (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1985), pp. 85–98, 85.

<sup>9</sup> Mathew Kukah, *Religion, Politics and Power in Northern Nigeria* (Ibadan: Spectrum, 1993), p. 56; Iheany Enwerem, 'The Church and Conflict Resolution in Nigeria', in *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology*, 2, (1999), 81–95, 85.

<sup>10</sup> Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), Three years Report of the Secretary General, 1967–1970, 1970.

<sup>11</sup> Federal Ministry of Information, Press Release 7 February 1968.

<sup>12</sup> Caritas Internationalis (CI). Memo, Sao Tome, 24 March, 1969; CSN, Summary of Grants received from Voluntary Bodies and Charitable organizations June 1968–August, 1970.

<sup>13</sup> CSN Press release: 'Caritas helps Nigerian Relief Work', 1968.

of July 1968, the CRS had provided 2,200 tons of milk. Its total value of goods supplied was US\$750,000.<sup>14</sup>

Unlike in the Federal-held territories, where relief work and workers enjoyed considerable freedom of operation, relief programmes in Biafra faced serious challenges. Having regarded Biafra as part of Nigeria, the FMG demanded to have control over relief programmes in the enclave. The Biafran Government rejected this move and declared its own position on the relief programmes in its territory.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the FMG set up its machinery of effective blockade against Biafra, which made relief services in the enclave a very difficult task.

By the beginning of 1968, food scarcity in Biafra, following the FMG's blockade, had reached crisis proportions. The local Church, in reaction to this situation, sought ways of bringing relief supplies to Biafrans. Attempts were made to break the FMG's blockade by smuggling in food items from Cameroon through Oron. Also, some foreign missionaries working in Biafra made their own personal and individual moves to assist the Biafran population.<sup>16</sup> Towards the end of the first quarter of 1968, the Church in Biafra could no longer cope with the situation. The collapse of Port Harcourt during this period worsened the situation.<sup>17</sup> Consequently, appeals were made by the leaders of the Church in the enclave to national and international bodies. For example, a number of letters were sent out by the Archbishop of Onitsha, from February 1968, soliciting assistance from individuals and organizations outside Nigeria.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, missionaries working in Biafra solicited help by circulating pictures of starving children around the globe, including their home countries, where they greatly aroused sympathy for the new republic and its people. The Biafran propaganda of fighting a religious war, as well as the genuine fear of genocide, largely explained the enthusiasm with which some of these missionaries called the attention of the world to Biafra. All these appeals attracted world attention to the new republic. Relief supplies and other monetary donations were made by various bodies, through Caritas. Initially, relief supplies were sent through Lisbon to Biafra. To increase its efficiency, a relief base was later established in Sao Tome. Relief supplies from various countries of the world were stockpiled in Sao Tome from where they were airlifted to Biafra. The services of Captain Wharton of the North American Aircraft Trading Cooperation, Miami, Florida, were later employed.<sup>19</sup> According to

<sup>14</sup> CSN, Letter to Relief Representatives by the Acting Secretary Social Welfare Dept., 11 July 1968.

<sup>15</sup> Biafra's government insisted on night flights. Its acceptance of day flight was on grounds that such will be arranged independent of the Federal Military Government. Since this would give Biafra advantage for arm procurement, the FMG declined. Thus all relief agencies which operated in Biafra (with the exception of the ICRC which in the early days seemed to have secured federal government permission to operate in Biafra, but fell out with Lagos latter) did so without the permission of the FMG.

<sup>16</sup> Some of these missionaries persuaded pilots flying Biafran military supplies from Lisbon to Port Harcourt to carry food and medicine parcels as well. Byrne also narrated how he smuggled goods from Cameroon through Oron to Biafra in the early days of the conflict. For details of these, see A. Byrne, *Breaching the Blockade: Airlift to Biafra* (Columbia: Columbian Press, 1997), p. 204.

<sup>17</sup> Port Harcourt was Biafra's last link to the outside world. With the occupation of the city by the Federal troops in the middle of 1968, the young republic was severed from the rest of the world and became landlocked.

<sup>18</sup> Most of the letters found were written in 1968. There were some others that were written in 1969. For details see Archdiocesan Catholic Secretariat of Onitsha (ACSO, file no. 247) Relief and Rehabilitation Policy 1967-1970.

<sup>19</sup> Wharton was a notorious gunrunner for the Biafran Government who also flew in relief materials on behalf of humanitarian agency when hired.

Anthony Byrne,<sup>20</sup> Wharton planes were chartered solely for Caritas cargoes. In other words, there was to be no mixed cargo. Between 27 March 1968 and 27 March 1969, Caritas sent 1,859 chartered flights, carrying a total of 20,000 tons of food and medicine at the cost of about £800,000.<sup>21</sup>

The poor state of Wharton's planes, and the inconsistency of his crews, hindered the progress of the operation. Also, constant accusations levelled against Caritas, particularly the one involving arms supply to the Biafran Government, did not help matters.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, by July 1968, the church had secured its own planes for the relief programme. A Joint Church Aid body, popularly known as JCA, was also established when some Protestant and Catholic Relief agencies organized themselves into a confederation. Since members of this organization were not in full support of the idea of the organization's aircrafts flying over countries without official permission of those countries, the ownership of the planes was given to Wharton's company. By this, the company was legally responsible for the flights and its crews, while JCA was given total control over the use of the aircraft and the selection of cargo. From August 1968 to the end of the programme, JCA sent over 60,000 tons of relief supplies in about 5,500 clandestine sorties flown by the squadron.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to its relief programme, the Catholic Church was also involved in searching for an end to the conflict. With the outbreak of hostilities, the Nigeria crisis gained more international status than ever. The Vatican was among the first to make early moves to intervene in the conflict. Pope Paul VI made a number of appeals for peace to the belligerents. On the 15 December 1967, for instance, the Pontiff sent his peace envoy to Nigeria to explore possible ways of intervening in the conflict. While the envoy visited Lagos and Kaduna, the mission was not carried to Biafra. Being the theatre of war, Federal Nigeria's Head of State, General Gowon, in spite of Biafra's call for truce, argued that the safety of the two prelates could not be guaranteed because such a truce could be violated by any secessionist group.<sup>24</sup> Following pressure from Biafrans and their government, a second Papal peace mission was undertaken in February 1968 through Lisbon to Biafra. Again, the Nigerian Minister for Transport, J. S. Tarka, was given audience by the Pope in February 1968, with a message to Gowon about his willingness to mediate in the conflict.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, in March, 1968, the Vatican, together with the World Council of Churches (WCC), appealed to both parties to cease hostilities and go to the conference table.<sup>26</sup> In August 1969, the Pope made another unsuccessful move to open up communication between the two parties in Kampala. Paul VI, who was in Uganda on an ecclesiastical mission, wanted to use the opportunity to meet the two parties to the conflict. The

<sup>20</sup> Anthony Byrne CSSP, who was formerly the Director of Social Service in Onitsha Archdiocese, was made the coordinator of the Caritas relief programme in Biafra following the outbreak of the war.

<sup>21</sup> Caritas Internationalis, Biafra Relief Programme, Progress Report on the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Consignments, 24 May 1968.

<sup>22</sup> Anthony Byrne, History of the Relief Programme in Biafra, Unpublished Manuscript, 1968.

<sup>23</sup> Byrne, *Breaching the Blockade*, p. 150.

<sup>24</sup> Emmanuel Otteh, the Bishop emeritus of Isele Uku Diocese, interviewed at Asaba, 26th May 2009; also see *African Research Bulletin*, 6 January 1968.

<sup>25</sup> *West Africa*, 10 February 1968, 17.3.

<sup>26</sup> World Council of Churches (WCC), DRCARWS (division of inter-church aid, refugee and world service), Progress Report on the Nigeria-Biafra Emergency. Report to the Divisional Committee, Geneva, June 1968.

meeting, which was arranged by Milton Obote, the then president of Uganda, under the auspices of the Pope, also failed.

Locally, the Nigeria–Biafra War appeared to have divided the Church. Before the outbreak of the war, the leaders managed to come together in search of peace. However, as soon as violence broke out between the two parties, such initial efforts were stifled. The Bishops on both sides to the conflict could no longer unite in their search for peace. Those who found themselves in Biafra as Bishops of Biafra (with a secretariat in Owerri) devoted their time largely to relief programmes in Biafra. The rest (majority) on the Federal side continued as the Bishops of Nigeria. Removed from the theatre of war, the latter were concerned with the safety and image of the Church and so spent their time defending the Church by counteracting the propaganda of religious war used by the Biafran Government. A number of developments explain their stand:

- The activities of some foreign missionaries from Biafra particularly in their home countries where they presented the civil war as genocide and religious war dominated discussions in the press and in the government houses and generated negative reactions against the Church.
- Caritas and other Catholic relief agencies' were involved in airlifting supplies to Biafra without the consent of the FMG.
- There was also wide spread rumour that the Church in Nigeria was divided.

All these generated negative criticism against the Church. It therefore became the burden of the bishops on the Federal side, to whom these reactions were channelled, to defend themselves and the Church without offending the FMG. Consequently, the issue of relief and safety of the Church dominated the response of the local Church to the conflict.

## Reactions from Federal Nigeria

Having presented the struggle to keep Nigeria whole as a noble cause, the FMG viewed any person, group(s) or action, which gave, or seemed to have given, recognition to Biafra as a separate entity, as an enemy of Nigeria and Africa. Following the visit of the papal peace delegates to both sides of the conflict, the FMG became suspicious of the church, particularly the missionaries on both sides of the conflict. If the FMG could boast of cooperation from missionaries on its side, the same was not true of the Biafran enclave. Moreover, an incident at the early stage of the war, in which some missionaries in the minority areas of the Eastern Region (Biafra) remained with the advance of the Federal troops while those in the Igbo area fled together with their flock,<sup>27</sup> showed that missionaries in the Igbo enclave were likely to dance to the drum beat of Biafra, especially with regard to their survival. It was with this feeling of suspicion and eye of scrutiny that the FMG reacted to the role of the Church in the civil war.

<sup>27</sup> The Igbo enclave was made up of the Holy Ghost missionaries from Ireland, while the non-Igbo area of Eastern Nigeria had largely missionaries of St Patricks from Ireland. Both the Igbo and non-Igbo areas of the minority were within the declared republic.

Its first obvious reaction was the reluctance of General Gowon to allow the papal delegates to visit Biafra. Although this was covered under the pretext of security, it was obvious that the General was not eager to provide a channel of communication with the outside world to Biafra through the prelates. Similar prohibition prevented the second flight of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) into the enclave.<sup>28</sup> However, to prove that Biafra was ready to receive delegations from outside Nigeria, while the papal delegates were still in Lagos waiting for permission from Gowon, Rev. E. A. Johnson, Secretary of the Overseas Missions of the Presbyterian Church in Canada, defied the blockade and flew into Biafra, where he held discussions with its government before visiting Lagos.<sup>29</sup>

The FMG also reacted strongly to the illegal flight to Biafra made by Caritas through Sao Tome. Biafra was not recognized by the FMG and its territory was therefore regarded as part of Federal Nigeria; thus, the Caritas airlift to Biafra was termed illegal. When it became crystal clear that the FMG's effort at effective blockade was being frustrated by Caritas airlift, criticisms and accusations were used against the latter. These accusations were recorded as follows:

- Caritas assists the rebels;
- Catholic Church and Caritas have mounted a religious war against Nigeria by airlifting supplies for Biafra;
- Caritas is helping Biafra with relief supplies and money for arms;
- Caritas recruited 200 mercenaries from Gabon under the supervision of Rev. Fr. Desmond Kennedy;
- The Democratic Party of Italy made a donation of £200,000 to Caritas;
- Caritas is flying in arms for Biafra;
- A high-powered meeting was held in the Vatican City on Biafra.<sup>30</sup>

These charges were countered by Carlo Bayer, the Secretary General of Caritas, on the 27 November 1968, in the following words:

- Caritas supplies relief material to both sides to the conflict and does not engage in political or military activities;
- No flight of any kind in that period was made by Caritas to Gabon;
- Fr. Raymond Kennedy is not a member of Caritas, but rather, the Director of African Concern Ltd, a non-profit company for the execution of charitable projects, who lives at 82 North Chamberland Road, Dublin;
- Caritas has used the facilities of African Concern to ship relief supplies from Europe to Africa;

<sup>28</sup> The ICRC made its first flight successfully to Biafra because, initially the FMG, did not declare outright refusal to allow relief operations in Biafra. Although it was averse to such operations, Gowon's government was conscious of the impression such refusal would make among the international community at that stage in the war. Aware that the ICRC operations in the enclave would provide some kind of a lifeline to Biafra, the FMG subtly and tactfully obstructed the second flight. When it eventually came out with a clear relief policy, the ICRC planes were hunted, such that in mid-1969, when one of its planes was shot down by the FMG air force, it had no option but to halt its relief flights to Biafra.

<sup>29</sup> Canarelief, Report of E. H. Johnson and K. G. Daris to Joint Church Aid, 1969.

<sup>30</sup> Federal Ministry of Information (FMI), Press Release, No. F. 300.

- No relationship exists between Caritas and the Christian Democratic Party in Italy;
- No such high-powered meeting on the theme 'Biafra' took place. The personalities mentioned in the Lagos Press release participated in a symposium, *Populorum Progressio*, to the third world which took place in Rome from the 11 to 16 October in *Della Pineto Sacchebi* (not the Vatican). The sponsors of the symposium were Intermachate Technology Development Group London and Monsignor L. G. Ligutti of Catholic Rural Life Conference. The Nigerian conflict was not in the agenda and was never mentioned in the meeting.<sup>31</sup>

A number of deductions could be made from these points. First, being the theatre of war, Caritas might have channelled its supplies more to Biafra than the Federal side. Second, since Biafra was continuously shrinking, more supplies would have been received in the enclave compared to what was received on the Federal side. Third, the Caritas insistence on its supplies being handled by its representative in Biafra could have given its relief programme there more publicity than on the Federal side, where the Church was expected to follow the government's guidelines on relief services. For instance, Caritas supplies to the Federal side were distributed through the Red Cross. By implication, credit went to the latter and not Caritas. Thus, both parties to the conflict did receive appreciable quantities of supplies from Caritas. However, the Biafran supplies received more publicity. Moreover, the unstable nature of the Biafran border meant that supplies which probably would have been packaged for a larger group in the enclave would have been received by less people with the shrinking of its territory.

On the issue of helping Biafrans with money for arms, there is evidence that Caritas and other funding agencies in their relief programme provided foreign currency to Biafra. In addition to relief supplies, donations of cash were made for purchasing local commodities such as salt, yam, garri, and fuel, and for maintenance of foreign missionaries in Biafra. However, this was not limited to the enclave as such donations were made to the Federal side as well. The differences were in the amounts provided and the level of dependence on such donations by the two governments. While the FMG may not have depended on such avenues for its acquisition of foreign currency, the Biafran Government seemed to have relied heavily on it, especially for the purchase of arms abroad. This heavy dependence became obvious when the Nigerian currency was changed.<sup>32</sup> Although no accurate figure has been reached, the Federal Minister of Information, Chief Anthony Enahoro, put the amount realized by the Biafran Government at fifty million pounds.<sup>33</sup> This figure might have been grossly exaggerated, but the fact remains that the Biafran Government might have boosted its war economy through an indirect access to foreign currency provided by the Church agencies for relief. The extent to which transferred cash from these agencies,

<sup>31</sup> Caritas International, *Action for the War Victims of the Nigerian Conflict*, September, Unpublished, Manuscript, 1968; also see Caritas International, *Quarterly Report Bulletin*, Fall 1968.

<sup>32</sup> As part of its war effort, the Federal Military Government recalled the old legal tender and introduced a new one in 1968. This was a blow to Biafra and Biafrans who, although issued with Biafra's own new currency, were limited in its usage since it was not widely accepted, especially outside the republic.

<sup>33</sup> *The Drum*, 3 March 1968, p. 1.



and from individual missionaries, contributed to the Biafran war effort is an area that needs attention by researchers on this war.

Caritas was also accused of flying arms for Biafra. This accusation may have arisen from a number of developments during the war. First, Caritas engaged the services of Captain Henry Wharton, who was a notorious gun-runner for the Biafran Government. This suggests that relief supplies and arms may have been flown together sometimes. However, evidence from Byrne claimed otherwise; the Catholic priest, who was in charge of the Caritas flight from Sao Tome to Biafra, maintained that in respect of their flight arrangements, the pilots were made to sign undertakings that the Church chartered flights were strictly for relief supplies<sup>34</sup> Moreover, Byrne noted that Caritas chartered the flights and paid for the entire space.<sup>35</sup> It was, according to him, this constant accusation of gun-running by the Nigerian press, and the preference of flying arms rather than relief supplies by most pilots, that necessitated the urgent need for Caritas aircraft.<sup>36</sup> In spite of these claims, the feasibility of mixed cargo, particularly in the early period, cannot be ruled out completely. Caritas could not have accumulated enough resources to charter all the flights at the early stage, when most humanitarian bodies and governments were yet to be involved in its relief programme. Byrne himself noted that the programme, because of the high cost of operation, was almost terminated after the twenty-fourth flight.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, even if the resources were available, the Church agency could not boast of a well-organized programme at that early stage. That gun-runners may have mixed relief items with arms without the knowledge of Caritas officials could not be overruled. In fact, Jorre affirmed that ‘sometimes, the church chartered the entire plane, but on other occasions, the food went in mixed up with the arms’. Mixed cargoes, he claimed, ‘stopped when the church acquired its own aircraft’.<sup>38</sup> The second reason which might have given rise to this accusation was the fact that the Church agency engaged the services of Wharton and his men even when it had secured its own planes. Apparently, Caritas had no experts in flight management who would have been saddled with such responsibility. Only a few pilots and companies were ready to undertake such risky flights to Biafra.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, Wharton feared any threat to his monopoly and thus resisted attempts made by other relief bodies (including the ICRC) to start their own flight operations to Biafra.<sup>40</sup> Biafra, anxious to retain the services of such a reliable gun-runner was slow in adopting any measure that would deny him such opportunity. Consequently, while Caritas, the ICRC, and Protestant churches had acquired their planes by mid-1968, it was not until August/September that their operations commenced after all the necessary arrangements for flying were concluded with the Biafran Government, which was slow to release the code necessary for landing at Uli Airport to any other pilots other than Wharton and his crew.<sup>41</sup> This association with

<sup>34</sup> Byrne, *Breaching the Blockade*, p. 102.

<sup>35</sup> Byrne, *The History of Relief Programme*, p. 26.

<sup>36</sup> Byrne, *Breaching the Blockade*, p. 86.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> John de St Jorre, *The Nigerian Civil War* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1972), p. 23.

<sup>39</sup> Obiukwu, 2009.

<sup>40</sup> Ingvar Berg, *Nordchurchaid: A Report on its Operation*, June 1970, p. 7.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

gun-runners even when, in the eyes of many, the Church agency could have pursued its programme independent of Wharton, did contribute to the accusations. Another reason which might have explained the arms accusation was that Caritas flights, like those of the gun-runners, were made at night. Following disagreement between the two sides over the mode of supplying relief materials to Biafra, the agencies had turned to night flights, which was permitted by the Biafran Government, and which also shielded its planes from the Nigerian bombers. There is little doubt that the Biafran Government also preferred night to day flights, for the same purpose, particularly for its arms business. That the Church agency could not persuade the Biafran Government to accept day flights, but took part in the night flights seemed to have lent credence to the gun-running theory. Finally, the explosion at Uli Airport in 1969, after the arrival of one of the Caritas planes, suggested that bombs brought in together with relief supplies must have been mishandled by either the crews, or those offloading the vessel. This, as Byrne noted, escalated the accusation about Caritas involvement in flying arms into Biafra.<sup>42</sup> According to Captain Ohaeri, one of the Biafran military installations at Uli exploded either because it was not well installed or the installed facility had expired.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, during the war, all sorts of military equipment found their way into Biafra. Some must have expired before they were purchased. Biafra, in desperate need of weapons and without enough funds, could have accepted them. In addition, most Biafran soldiers were those who underwent crash military training for just two weeks or less. Paucity of well-trained soldiers and military engineers was evident during the war. Apparently, some military hardware did not receive the expertise required in installing and manning it.

On the accusation that Caritas supplies were used in feeding Biafran soldiers, one outstanding fact in the organization's airlift to Biafra was that it never allowed its supplies to be handled by any other group except its representatives in Biafra. When the Biafran Government wanted to interfere in the distribution of salt, for instance, the body threatened to halt its relief supply to the enclave.<sup>44</sup> However, an obvious fact was the mishandling of relief supplies. Through this, Caritas supplies would have been diverted to the soldiers' camps.

The third major reaction of Federal Nigeria was against the activities of foreign missionaries in Biafra. In addition to the fear of genocide of the Igbo, which was rife in Biafra, some missionaries were influenced by the Biafran propaganda of religious war. According to John Ledkicher, foreign editor of the *Catholic News Service*, a majority of the stories on the Nigerian crisis published in the *CNS* were supplied by missionaries, most of whom were 'pro- Biafra'.<sup>45</sup> One of the major objections of the FMG to this development was made against F.A. Dempsey and Daniel Lyon's TV programme and publication in the US, accusing the Federal Government of waging a

<sup>42</sup> Byrne, *Breaching the Blockade*, p. 159.

<sup>43</sup> Ohaeri, Onyeoziri, An ex-Biafran soldier of 63 Brigade, 55 Battalion, Interviewed at Oji River War Veteran Center, 6th August 2009.

<sup>44</sup> See Minutes of the Executive Council, Committee of Supply. Report of meeting held in the chambers of the Chief Justice (of Biafra) on Emergency procurement and Distribution of Salt in the Republic, 20 March 1969. National Archives Enugu (NAE) FRP/X.10.

<sup>45</sup> Ledkicher, cited in K.Roghinyer., 'What Really Happened in Biafra', *Columbia Journalism Review*, 4:3, (1970), 24, 31.

genocidal war against Biafra. Lyon's TV series, 'Meeting of Minds', screened on NBC-TV Washington DC on 8 September 1968, giving some statistics for the conflict, accused the FMG of trying to exterminate Catholic Biafrans through economic blockade and other means.<sup>46</sup> This generated protests from the FMG and some other Nigerians on the Federal side. Some copies of the tapes were made available to the Church leader in Lagos to prove to them that the Church was taking sides in the war. Some bishops were also invited to Dodan Barracks near Lagos, where the film, 'Meeting of Minds', was played for them. At the end, Gowon strongly appealed to them to refute the error propagated abroad. In a response to this appeal, the Church leaders went to the media house in Lagos to denounce the film. A trip to Rome was made in December 1968, where these religious men decried the activities of some missionaries, especially their publications, which were receiving sharp criticism from the Federal Government. Similarly, in his message to the bishops during their extraordinary meeting in 1969, Gowon implored the Church leaders to counteract the impressions created by the missionaries abroad that it was a religious war against the East. The General urged the religious leaders to give unflinching support in eloquent expressions within and outside Nigerian to the struggle for a united and prosperous Nigeria:

All we want of you is to tell the wide world of the truth of our situation; that no untoward action has been taken against your activities in the country; that Catholic education, medical and other institutions are free to carry out their work unmolested; that churches are open and masses said daily; you will be rendering your church and indeed the whole world tremendous service in this way.<sup>47</sup>

In a response entitled 'Message of Greeting and Loyalty to Gowon' which was also circulated, the bishops adopted without mincing words the wishes of General Gowon:

We once again reiterate that the present unfortunate strife is not a RELIGIOUS WAR [...], we must also point out that religious rights and freedom have always been upheld and respected during the tragic fratricidal strife. No untoward action has been taken against our activities in this country; Catholic education, medical and other institutions are free to carry out their work unmolested; churches are open and masses are celebrated daily'.<sup>48</sup>

Obviously religious leaders on the Federal side were dancing to the drum-beat of the FMG. It was clear, by October 1969, that Biafra was collapsing. For the survival of the Church in general, and the missionaries in particular, in future Nigeria, Gowon had to be appeased. Although such compromise from the bishops on the Federal side would have been slow to come by in the early days of the conflict, at this stage of the war, it was easy to give in to Gowon's request and the bishops, who were largely

<sup>46</sup> For details of the publication see the National Archives Ibadan (NAE) /CVC/1/21968.

<sup>47</sup> See 'the Goodwill Message of His Excellency, Major General Yakubu Gowon, Head of the Federal Military Government and Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces, to the Roman Catholic Episcopal Conference of Nigeria on September, 30th 1969', in *Towards Peace*, a monograph published by the CSN, 1969.

<sup>48</sup> See 'A message of Peace and Loyalty to His Excellency, Major General Yakubu, Gowon, from the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria gathered for Conference in Lagos, September, 30th, 1969', *ibid.*

foreigners, readily acceded to Gowon's appeal. It is pertinent to note that, while the church leaders on the Federal side were against the religious propaganda of the Biafran Government and the involvement of some missionaries in it, they stood up for the relief programmes of the church agencies in the beleaguered republic. For instance, on their return from one of their trips to Rome, they declared against one of the newspaper reports that they went to the Vatican to protest against Caritas airlift to Biafra.<sup>49</sup>

The expulsion of missionaries from Eastern Nigeria during and after the war, and the treatment meted out to them, was in reaction to what the FMG perceived as their role during the Nigerian crisis. The deportation of the missionaries began before the end of the war. As Biafra shrank, some missionaries who did not move with their flock were out of favour with the FMG. Consequently, a good number of them left Nigeria. At the end of the war, those in the Biafran-held area (about 101 of them) were detained in Port Harcourt and charged with illegal entry into Nigeria.<sup>50</sup> At the end of the court proceedings, they were imprisoned for four months with a fine of £50,000 each, and all to be deported at the expiration of their court terms. It is pertinent to note that some of these missionaries, who were suddenly charged with illegal entry into Nigeria, had worked in Nigeria for more than twenty years. A sudden reawakening of the government's need to enforce its immigration policies can better be explained from the point of view of punishment for the missionaries for the role they played during the war — a role which Bishop Joseph Whelam of Owerri Diocese declared before the Chief Magistrate in Port Harcourt as 'a great responsibility before God and man'.<sup>51</sup> The River State Government, in a letter to the Bishops, added another dimension to this reaction when it restricted River State to Nigerian and African priests alone immediately after the war.<sup>52</sup>

Lastly, some pronouncements from the Vatican and some notable church leaders were not well-taken by the FMG and some Nigerians, and thus generated a number of negative reactions. An address in July 1968, where Paul VI referred to Biafrans as 'my children' generated a lot of criticism in which the Pope was seen as taking sides in the war.<sup>53</sup> Ordinarily, this may not have generated any negative reaction, but in a war in which every group was eager to exploit the slightest chance, such a statement became important. In a six-man protest-delegation led by Adetokumbo Ademola, the Chief Justice of Nigeria, to the papal delegate to Central and West Africa, the Pope

<sup>49</sup> The bishops made it clear at the Ikeja airport that they did not go to Rome for such because Caritas was a charitable organ of the church that was trying to bring succour to the suffering people on both sides of the conflict. For details see 'Statement of Archbishop Aggey, Bishops Finn and Usanga on their return from Rome', 16 December, 1968, at the Ikeja Airport, CSN/WC/3/ 1969.

<sup>50</sup> For details of the report on the conditions of the detained missionaries at the end of the war see 'Situation in the East Central State as of February, 22nd 1970, Delegation to Port Harcourt to Assist the Missionaries detained', Archdiocesan Catholic Secretariat of Kaduna (ACSK) /1970.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> The report of this delegation appeared in a Press Release of the CSN, no.2, 126/68, 8 August 1968. The governor barred foreign missionaries from working in his State. By implication, all those who were already there were to leave as well. For details see 'An Address from the Military Governor of River State to the Catholic Bishop Conference Meeting in Lagos, 24-27th February, 1970'. CSN,WC2/1970; also see *Catholic News* 24 February, 1970.

<sup>53</sup> *Tablet* 222, no.6707, 7 December 1968.

was accused of failing to consider Catholics outside the East Central State.<sup>54</sup> Again, following the appeal of the Vatican and the World Council of Churches (WCC) on the 20<sup>th</sup> March 1968, Gowon, on the 31<sup>st</sup> of that month, condemned the role played by ‘certain Christian Bodies’, a role he described as ‘*rebel position*’.<sup>55</sup> He condemned in particular the advocacy by the Vatican and the WCC for a ceasefire outside the Federal twelve-state structure as a basis or pre-condition for negotiation. This he described as a manifestation of the clear backing of the rebels. Furthermore, when the Pope and the Cardinal of Westminster issued some public statements in July 1968 calling for an end to hostility, a criticism in Radio Nigeria, Lagos, was launched against the church:

Nigerian Christians are sick and tired of ill-informed Christians and the partisan intervention of foreign church dignitaries in the Nigerian conflict [...] Nigerian Christians must think deeply about the true meaning of the actions of the foreign church dignitaries.<sup>56</sup>

Similarly, Cardinal White’s sermon, in which he spoke of ‘a genocidal war’, and a statement in *L’Osservatore Romano* that referred to a ‘war of extermination’ in Nigeria, infuriated the FMG and some other Nigerians who condemned the Church.<sup>57</sup> Finally, the Pope’s public address at the end of the war, where he cautioned that the genocide of the Igbo could still become a reality, received the most volatile reaction from both the FMG and Nigerians on the Federal side. In addition to abuse from the press, a coffin symbolizing the death of the Supreme Pontiff was carried to the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Lagos and was received by its secretary.<sup>58</sup>

For a number of reasons, the fear of the genocide against the Igbo was a common one during the Nigerian crisis. First, while the missionaries in the Northern Region witnessed the massacre of the Igbo in 1966, those in the East received, lived with, and cared for, the returnee easterners with severed limbs. Thus, with the outbreak of the civil war, the fear of a repetition of such pogrom was rife among the missionaries in the Eastern Region. Second, by using starvation as a weapon of war against Biafra, the Biafran Government recognized early enough the potency of such an instrument in boosting its cause, and exploited it to the full. In his address to the Consultative Assembly in Umuahia in 1968, the head of the Biafran Government remarked, ‘our aim all along has been to delay the enemy until the world conscience can effectively be aroused against genocide’.<sup>59</sup> Effective blockade was therefore seen as a way of starving the Igbo to death. Third, the indiscriminate bombing of civilian centres by the Nigerian planes lent voice to the genocide of the Igbo. For instance, on 9 March 1968, the *Tablet*, an influential Catholic British weekly, was noted to have reported the bombing of markets and schools in Biafra.<sup>60</sup> Similarly, the *Irish Times*, on

<sup>54</sup> This delegation was captured in the Press Release of the CSN, no.2, 126/68, 8 August 1968.

<sup>55</sup> *African Research Bulletin*, March 1968, 1012.

<sup>56</sup> *Tablet* 222, no. 6707, 7 December, 1968; see also Kirk Green, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Source Book, 1968–1970*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 46–47.

<sup>57</sup> *West Africa*, no. 2660, May, 25 1968, p. 662; also see *Tablet* 222, no. 6680, 18 May 1968, 586.

<sup>58</sup> Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Three Years Report.

<sup>59</sup> O. Ojukwu, *Biafra: Selected Speeches and Random Thoughts* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 357.

<sup>60</sup> *West Africa*, 17 February 1968, 205.

12 March 1968, published John Hogan's article on the massacre of defenceless civilians.<sup>61</sup> It was based on this that Winston Churchill, in 1969, argued that the Egyptian pilots hired by the FMG regarded Biafra as a free-bomb zone since none of the places bombed had any military target. He noted that the Nigerian Air Force carried out five bombing raids in Umuahia on 25 February 1969, at a Red Cross Headquarters, a hospital, a market place, a clinic for convalescing patients, and a Red Cross vehicle. Churchill concluded that 'such consistent attack on hospitals and civilian population can in no way be attributed to misidentification of targets or to inaccurate bombing'.<sup>62</sup> On 1 March 1968, Mathew Mba, the Biafran Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, in his letter to U Thant, accused the FMG of genocide and atrocious violation of human rights. About forty-eight bombing attacks on civilian centres were recorded and submitted to the UN's Committee on Human Rights.<sup>63</sup> From the above, it was obvious that the operational code of conduct which Obasanjo claimed guided the Armed Forces during the war was only on paper.<sup>64</sup> All this lent credence to the genocide imbroglio and must have contributed immensely in propelling some missionaries to solicit support for Biafrans. Pictures of starved children and mothers circulated abroad were potent in arousing the concern of the world, including the Vatican. Although communication with the outside world was easier through Lagos when compared with Biafra, the missionaries seemed to have filled the Vatican with the news of the situation in Biafra, such that it will not be wrong to argue that the Pope and the Vatican officials were more acquainted with the situation in Biafra than the church leaders in Federal Nigeria. Thus, at the collapse of Biafra, the deep impression made by the 1966 massacre, the ugly pictures of starved children and women during the war, and those indiscriminate bombings could not have disappeared from the Pontiff's imagination. If the massacre of 1966, the starvation, and the bombing of civilian centres during the war, were conceived as acts of genocide, the collapse of Biafra and the safety of the Igbo, at the mercy of the Federal troops, made genocide more feasible, hence the Pope's pronouncement.

The allusion to genocide by the Pontiff could also be explained by the projection of the war as a religious war of the Muslims against the Catholic East. It is a truism that such was largely propaganda since Christians, including Catholics, were on both sides of the war, but the Pope might have been influenced, to some extent, by such publications. The Pontiff differed, in some of his decisions on the Nigerian crisis, from the other Vatican officials who wanted him to be more diplomatic in some of his pronouncements. For instance, at the preparation of the speech to be made at the end of the war, the Secretary of State and his deputy were of the opinion that the word genocide should not be used as it was likely to generate negative reactions from Nigerians. The suggestion was dropped. It may not be ruled out completely that the Pope's statement was partly informed by his concern for the safety of the well-known

<sup>61</sup> John Horgan, 'War in the Air: Defenceless Civilians Are Massacred by the Nigerian Jets', *Irish Times*, 12 March 1968, 10.

<sup>62</sup> Winston Churchill, 'Nigerian Planes Bomb Biafran Markets and Clinics' *The Times*, 28 Feb 1969, 2.

<sup>63</sup> This was reported in *The Observer*, 3 March 1968, 4; *West Africa*, 16 March 1966, 325; *Africa Report*, 1 May 1968, 40.

<sup>64</sup> O. Obasanjo, *My Command: An Account of the Nigerian Civil War 1967-1970* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1980), pp. 166-167.

Catholic-dominated enclave in Nigeria. Paul VI was a diplomat of international repute who was once the head of the Roman Curia. It will therefore be out of place to argue that he was unaware of the implications of using the word genocide in the Nigerian situation. Rather than seeing his pronouncement as untactful, as Jorre noted,<sup>65</sup> the Pope displayed his shrewd diplomacy. For one thing, despite the negative reactions and criticisms it generated, there is no gainsaying the fact that the papal statement put the FMG on the side of caution in its post-war policies.

Other reactions against the church's role in war include: reluctance to publish information from the Catholic Church by the Nigerian press, radio, and television; demand for an African Pope; and the rejection of the church's offer through its agencies to assist in the post-war rehabilitation. In fact, the two papal delegates sent at the close of 1969 to explore possible means of assisting in rehabilitation did not receive any response on the issue of post-war relief and rehabilitation.<sup>66</sup> Gowon's stand was: 'Let the foreign do-gooders keep their money'.<sup>67</sup>

### Reactions from the Biafran Government

Biafra was a sign of rebellion from a worldwide reorganized Republic of Nigeria. That every person and group in the enclave would welcome and support the young republic was not certain. One group whose position at the onset of the war was not clear was the Catholic Church, especially the foreign missionaries who constituted more than half of the clergy in the region. Whether the missionaries would support or be against, remain neutral or columnist in the Biafra struggle was not obvious. The visit of the papal delegates marked a turning point from this air of uncertainty. First, it ascertained (even if what they — Biafrans — thought was untrue) the stand of the church in Biafra. Biafrans and the Biafran Government mounted pressure on the church in Biafra through their criticisms in the press, radio, and television, in reaction to the uncompleted mission of the delegates. In a memorandum to the Pope, the Biafran bishops stated:

We have grave reason to fear that the failure of the mission to come to our ecclesiastical province would arouse deep resentment and even extreme reaction from both the military and the Christians [...]  
The arrival of papal mission will be a source of the greatest solace to our people and would evoke their deepest gratitude, since they did not understand why the papal mission should be prevented from coming to them at a time when they felt abandoned by the whole world.<sup>68</sup>

From the tone of the letter, it was not likely that the bishops, who were already complaining about the abandonment of their people, would desert Biafra and

<sup>65</sup> St Jorre, p.234.

<sup>66</sup> Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, 'The Journey of the Papal Delegates, Monsignors Jean Bodhain and George Huesslee', 1970.

<sup>67</sup> For details on Gowon's rejection of foreign assistance see, 'Gowon Refuses Relief from Hostile Agencies', NAI/CWR3/I.37.

<sup>68</sup> See Memorandum submitted to the Pope on behalf of the Archbishop and hierarchy of the Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province by Bishop James Moynah of Calabar and Godfrey Okoye of Port Harcourt. 1968. AASCO/file no. 247/1970.

Biafrans in this time of greet need. Moreover, the view of the bishops in the letter was akin to that of the Biafran Government and the press, namely: that the FMG prevented the delegates from visiting Biafra. Second, the visit being the first official and international delegation to Biafra imbued its government and the people with psychological support. Finally, and most importantly, the visit provided a good ground for exploiting and manipulating religion within and outside Biafra. Being the theatre of war, the Biafran Government seemed to have understood perfectly the place of human suffering in the history and mission of the church and exploited it to the full. In his reply to the papal delegates, Ojukwu told the prelates to let the Pope know that Biafrans were happy to have the comfort of his message, that they were ready at any moment, without further consultation or further discussion, to accept a ceasefire and to go to the table to negotiate an honourable peace.<sup>69</sup> In that address, Ojukwu adopted the position of the afflicted, suffering, and innocent, who was always ready for peace. That would appeal to any religious conscience. Whether the Biafrans were comforted by the message or not was immaterial; to any ear that heard about the papal comfort, Biafrans were the ‘maligned children of God’. This, indeed, was expected to arouse sentiments from other international bodies in favour of Biafra. In addition to this exploitation, there seemed to be an element of pressure from the Biafran Government on the clergy to support its cause. For example, in one of the delegations of the foreign missionaries to Zachaus O. Nwosu, the Okigwe Provincial Administrator, the missionaries were reassured of their safety and prosperity in Biafra as long as they were with the government.

Knowing that the support of the church, especially the missionaries would internationalize the Biafran struggle and win sympathy, the Biafran Government courted and valued the role of the church in Biafra and used it in promoting its war effort. It avoided, or handled carefully, any development that would lead to a clash with the church and thereby destroy its chance of exploiting religion in the war. For instance, the consent of the church in Biafra was sought before the destruction of the Uga church structure with a promise of a better edifice if Biafra survived the war. On the other hand, the courtship with the church was disregarded when better opportunities seemed to arrive. A practical example was the case of the Italian oil workers held in Biafra. When the men of the Italian oil firm in Biafra were caught and detained by the Biafran troop, the effort of the Pope to get them released was in vain. Apparently, the Biafran Government saw a better opportunity to promote the Biafran cause. Italian recognition of Biafra would have indeed raised the status of the new republic and was therefore valued more than the religious propaganda. Although when he later changed his mind, Ojukwu called on the Caritas representatives to witness the release of those oil-men, making it appear as if the sudden change of mind was due to the Pontiff’s appeal. The fact remains though that the Biafran propaganda abroad, following the treatment of the oil-men, suffered a serious setback. Relief funds dropped drastically as donors could not reconcile the appeals for help with the oil-men imbroglio. It was only when it dawned on the headship of the beleaguered republic that his plan had backfired that the oil-men were released in the name of the church. If the goal of the big venture could not be realized, the old method of religious

<sup>69</sup> Details of Ojukwu’s reply to Papal peace envoy, see *The Biafran Times*, 11 February 1968, 2.



manipulation could continue to prolong Biafra, if it could not secure it completely, until a permanent solution to the conflict was found. This implies that the church, and religion in general, would have been discarded, if the target of Biafrans in attacking the oil-men was realized.

Another practical example of the reaction of the Biafran Government was evident in the salt imbroglio. The determination of the Biafran Government to control the distribution of salt sent by Caritas by selling it, was opposed by Caritas and other relief agencies that contributed to its airlift to Biafra, with a threat to terminate their programme if the government was bent on enforcing the policy. Knowing the consequences of such termination in mid-1969, when the ICRC had suspended its airlift to Biafra,<sup>70</sup> the government tried to convince the agencies through dialogue until a near-middle of the road approach was adopted which still left supplies largely with the church.

A series of communications<sup>71</sup> between the church leaders and the government also revealed cooperation rather than negative reactions from the Biafran Government, particularly regarding relief programmes. In fact, Bishop Godfrey Okoye, according to oral evidence, was said to have had direct links with the head of the Biafran Government and commanded his attention with or without appointment.<sup>72</sup> This cooperation is understandable when the composition of the church leaders on the two sides of the conflict is taken into consideration. While those on the Federal side, including their leaders, were predominantly foreigners, the church on the Biafran side, with the exception of Owerri Diocese, was led by local bishops. The Biafran struggle was in some ways seen by them as their struggle, particularly with the FMG's economic blockade and its general conduct of war, which strongly supported the argument on the genocide of the Igbo. This generated subtle cooperation with the government of Biafra particularly in relief and rehabilitation programmes. All those activities which elicited negative reactions from the FMG were therefore welcomed with joy in Biafra by its government.

## Conclusions

Feeling that its struggle to keep Nigeria one was a noble cause, the FMG expected the Catholic Church's support against rebellion. Unfortunately, the church's mandate goes beyond promotion of unity. In fact, identification with the weak and the vulnerable, in a situation as found in Biafra, takes precedence over all political consideration. Therefore, while the church assisted the Federal Nigeria in its relief and rehabilitation programme, it stood against one of its most effective instruments of ending the war, i.e. starving Biafra. Although it may be argued that the FMG did not mean to starve Biafrans to death but rather to squeeze concessions from the Biafran Government, the attitude of the Federal troops in Biafra, and the general

<sup>70</sup> The suspension was as a result of the destruction of its relief plane by the federal air force and the ultimatum that its officials should leave Nigeria. See ICRC Press Information Service, Geneva, 4 July 1969; ICRC, Press Release No.9846, Geneva, 4 June 1969, National Archives Enugu (NAE). MSP/X. 10/ 1069.

<sup>71</sup> For some of these letters see ACSO, no. 247 Relief and Rehabilitation Policy, 1967–1970.

<sup>72</sup> V.Njoku, A relief worker attached to Late Bishop Godfrey Okoye, Caritas representative in Biafra. Interviewed at Ihiala, Anambra State, 13 February 2009.

conduct of the war, negate this argument. Indeed the massacre of the Igbo on the eve of the war with all its genocidal features, the situation in Biafra during the war, and the pictures of dying women and children widely circulated, kept the fear of genocide alive and made it impossible for the FMG to gain international support — the church included — of its claims to good-intentions. In addition, the rate at which the Federal Nigerian bombers targeted civilian centres in Biafra lent weight to the argument of genocide of the Igbo in Biafra.<sup>73</sup> The conscience of the church was therefore evoked. Obviously, the FMG's effort to keep Nigeria whole was a noble cause; however, its manner and means of doing so was not only unacceptable to the human conscience, but more costly than allowing Biafra its freedom. The Church's relief programme in general, like that of the ICRC, stood not against the unity of Nigeria, but the absurd instrument to unity and peace. However, standing against such an instrument of war was, in the eyes of the FMG a frustration of its war effort and a prolongation of the war.

There is no doubt that the relief programme of the church promoted the Biafran war efforts. Its government was largely relieved of the burden of catering for its population and thus directed its attention more to its war effort. In addition to the publicity which its relief programme gave to the Biafran cause, the pro-Biafran stand of some foreign missionaries as well as subtle cooperation in relief programmes between the local church leaders in Biafran and the Biafran Government, implies that Biafra must have benefited from the church beyond its relief programme. Some further research, however, is needed to establish the extent to which foreign currencies transferred by the church agencies and personnel boosted the Biafran war economies, and the degree to which it was intentionally done. Such advantage which the church's involvement conferred on Biafra added to the frustration of the FMG and elicited a distrust of the Church.

The reaction of the Biafran Government to the role of the church in the war was completely different from that of the FMG. The religious composition of the Eastern Region offered a template on which the Biafran Government stood to manipulate and exploit religion in the war. Having the largest concentration of Catholics in Nigeria, it understood the role of such composition in the war and so used it to seek the sympathy and support of both the local church in Biafra, and the Vatican. Although available evidence points to what seemed like subtle cooperation between the local church in Biafra and the Biafran Government in relief programmes, the Vatican efforts were geared more towards finding an end to the conflict — efforts which were largely unsuccessful.

Belligerents in a conflict situation will always seek for legitimization of their positions and actions. Religion is one of the forces that confer such legitimacy more than others. Hence, religious groups and leaders are often sought for support or intervention in a time of crisis. In the case of the Nigeria–Biafra War, both parties sought the approval of the Church. However, Biafra seemed to have better chances than the

<sup>73</sup> Treatment meted out to the Igbo people across the Niger also flawed the 'good' intention theory. For details on the ordeals of the Igbo across the Niger under the Federal Troops see E. Okocha, *Blood on the Niger: An Untold Story of the Nigerian Civil War* (Lagos: Sunray Publication, 1994); E. Uchendo, *Women and Conflict in Nigerian Civil War* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 2007).

Federal side. Even when approval neither came from the Vatican nor clearly from the local church, the Biafran Government manipulated and exploited its chances, to the chagrin of the FMG. By using starvation as one of its instruments of war and with its general war conduct, the FMG isolated itself from the Church and covertly fanned the embers of the Biafran propaganda. Consequently, peace moved farther away. When the exploitative potential of religion in a conflict situation becomes more palpable, its ability for peace making dwindles. Such was the case in the Nigeria–Biafra War.

### **Notes on contributor**

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