

(peer-review)

Biafran Refugees: A Tale of Endurance and Brutality

By Philip U. Effiong, Ph.D.

Professor of English

University of Maryland University College

Adelphi, Maryland

Preamble

I have read and listened with some interest, annoyance and even half amusement as self-styled historians and experts on the Nigeria-Biafra *Civil War* (1967-1970) applaud General Yakubu Gowon and his army for their humane and compassionate handling of Biafra's surrender and the subsequent conclusion of the war. Not surprisingly, such eagerness to delineate Gowon's regime as something synonymous with humanitarian largely comes from elite scholars who did not experience Biafra, who lost no one during the war and whose communities and people did not endure the type of starvation and devastation of life and property that Biafrans had to contend with. Just as they observed the war from the comfort and safety of their communities (for those that were alive at the time), they also make their brazen claims from the comfort of their research locations (be it a home or formal office), never making any serious effort to venture into former Biafra and engage those who were direct victims of the conflict (or at least their descendants). I say this because if they carry out such grassroots research it is not likely that they would shamelessly heap praises on an enemy that committed a series of war crimes and human rights violations that have never been fully addressed. Their admiration for Gowon's post-war diplomacy often reads like a recycling of the information put forward by his administration and a

blatant pandering to the status quo. Largely mainstream in their acquisition and dissemination of information, these intellectuals lack the more intense, rigorous and investigative acumen and output that exemplifies independent research and reporting. It is apparent that their desire to disseminate balanced information is dwarfed by their desire to be politically cautious or correct with Nigeria and Britain.

To isolate, focus on and in some cases misrepresent the events surrounding the end of the war, and to use such assessment to assert the benevolence of Gowon's regime is as absurd as it is seriously inadequate. We must look at the larger picture; otherwise, we will be compelled to adopt the type of docility that has dominated post-apartheid South Africa. After releasing Nelson Mandela from prison where he had spent 27 long years for no justifiable reason, former President Frederik Willem de Klerk, a leading enforcer of apartheid doctrines, received a Nobel Peace Prize alongside Mandela in 1993. He later appeared before South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 1998 where he exonerated himself from all accusations, claiming that he was unaware of the human rights abuses that took place under his watch. Former President Pieter Willem Botha went a step further and openly defied a subpoena to appear before the Commission in 1998, for which he hardly faced any reprisals. (He later died on October 31, 2006.) Today, de Klerk, along with his fellow racist criminals, lives a fairly comfortable and secure life and is yet to be held accountable for the murder, torture, false imprisonment and economic exploitation of several non-Whites that took place when he was president.

I certainly don't want to give the impression that I don't admire the manner in which both warring sides handled a peace agreement at the end of the Nigeria-Biafra War, for it was a treaty that remains unparalleled on the African continent and in most parts of the world. Ongoing or lingering conflicts in nations like the Democratic Republic of Congo, Israel, the Sudan and

Somalia, and “concluded” conflicts in nations like Nicaragua, the Ivory Coast, Liberia and Rwanda reinforce the exceptional manner in which the Nigeria-Biafra War was formally brought to an end. In the former situations, the conflicts have ultimately persisted and even when the weapons have stopped blazing an awkward aura of commotion and unease remains. Without the often drawn out and rarely conclusive intervention of the United Nations or its standard peacekeeping force, or of other international initiatives, the Nigeria-Biafra peace accord achieved a commendable degree of resolution and restored a profound measure of social normalcy. In this regard, Gowon and his government must be given much credit, as should be the Biafran delegation that risked all to go to Lagos and finalize Biafra’s capitulation. But, as with de Klerk, a decision to stop committing atrocities does not automatically vindicate the perpetrator, not even when the perpetrator keeps his promise.

The Creation and Mutilation of Biafran Refugees

When Gowon’s administration decided to enforce Chief Obafemi Awolowo’s philosophy of utilizing starvation as a legitimate instrument of war, Biafra’s socioeconomic reality made it fairly easy for the policy to be implemented. Prior to the war, a serious refugee problem had already begun to develop when thousands of Easterners (mostly Igbos)¹ were forced to flee the North following the mob massacres that took place there in May, June, July, August and September, 1966. Alluding to the September scenario, which involved participation by Northern troops,² Major-General Alexander Madiebo, Commander of the Biafran Army, recaptures the aftermath graphically:

¹ Although distinctions are made between “Igbo” and “Ibo,” in this paper I will keep things simple by using “Igbo” throughout to represent the people and their language. I regret if anyone is offended by this decision.

² Luke N. Aneke, *The Untold Story of the Nigeria-Biafra War* (New York: Triumph Publishing), 69.

The resumed killings brought with it an influx of refugees into Eastern Nigeria from all over the Federation of Nigeria. They came back...in pathetic and shocking conditions. Most of them had one or the other part of their bodies either broken or completely missing. Thousands of children arrived, some with severed limbs and others emasculated. The adults bore the full brunt of the killings....Those whose limbs were not severed, brought them back shattered and had to be amputated anyway. Many others had their eyes, nose, ears and tongues plucked out. The highlight of this horror was the arrival in Enugu of the headless corpse of an Ibo man! Women above the age of ten were raped and many of them came back in stretchers. The remaining Eastern Nigerian soldiers in Lagos...arrived either naked or in their underpants and the big gashes on their bodies showed that they had been thoroughly beaten and tortured. There was hardly a single family in Eastern Nigeria which did not suffer a loss through these massacres.³

If those who took part in the slaughter of thousands of Easterners were not directed by the July 1966 coup plotters, they were certainly motivated by their actions. Gowon's new regime did nothing concrete to stem the wave of violence; in fact, it didn't even condemn the killings. The regime's subsequent actions essentially reinforced the anti-Eastern aggression as it implemented a series of policies that deliberately sought to further marginalize, degrade and suppress Easterners. Those who couldn't find their way back to the East were compelled to register and carry passes in Lagos and other parts of the country where they lived.⁴ Clearly, they had lost their recognition and rights as citizens of the country. By October of the same year, government enforced a food and economic blockade of Eastern Nigeria by air, land and sea (which continued throughout the impending war), and denied issuance of Nigerian passports to people of the

³ Alexander A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and the Biafran War* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1980), 84.

⁴ Aneke, 140.

region. Even postal, telegraphic and transport services between other parts of Nigeria and the East were put to a stop by Gowon's regime.⁵ The above measures demonstrate deliberate and callous efforts to deprive Easterners tenable legitimacy and to exclude them from the larger Nigerian federation. This is very critical, especially for those who are quick to lambast Biafrans for attempting to tear Nigeria apart. It is evident that the people were not simply trying to break away for self-seeking reasons, but were succumbing to ruthless forces that had repeatedly expressed an unwillingness to tolerate and coexist with them.

The dire situation and plight of Easterners was exacerbated as the war gained momentum and the enemy made considerable inroads into Biafra, leading to the constant relocation of civilian populations that lost shelter and the basic means to fend for themselves. The relatives and friends that initially catered to the needs of returnee Easterners in 1966 soon found themselves in desperate need of accommodation, sustenance and security. A refugee crisis was imminent and soon became a major burden for the young, ailing nation. Starvation was indeed proving to be an effective weapon (even if not a moral one) and the calculated economic blockade of Biafra impeded sufficient relief supply from abroad. Perhaps this blockade was most sadistically demonstrated on June 5, 1969, when an International Red Cross Plane, a DC-7, with a mixed crew of Swedish, American and Norwegian citizens, was shot down by a federal MiG war plane.⁶ Throughout the war, relief planes flying into Biafra's Uli Airstrip from Sao Tome faced the real threat of being shot down by enemy planes and anti-aircraft weapons.

⁵ Raph Uwechue, *Reflections on the Nigerian Civil War: Facing the Future*, Revised (Paris: Jeane Afrique, 1971), 61.

⁶ David Lednicer, "Intrusions, Overflights, Shootdowns and Defections During the Cold War and Thereafter," November 8, 2005, accessed November 17, 2010, http://www.silent-warriors.com/shootdown_list.html. Also see Ezeobi Okechukwu Stanley, "The Untold Story of Nigerian-Biafran War <forgotten genocide>," *Vanguard Online Community*, March 2, 2010, accessed November 5, 2010, <http://community.vanguardngr.com/forum/topics/the-untold-story-of>.

Economic blockade and attacks against relief planes were just a few of the methods used to ensure that Awolowo's starvation policy was fully realized. All resources, institutions and facilities that were considered potential sources of food and nourishment soon fell victim to the enemy's bombing onslaught, including refugee camps, hospitals, villages, farmlands and marketplaces. The prime victims were not just civilians but women, the elderly and children, since Biafran males from roughly ages 13 and up typically enlisted in the army or were forcefully conscripted, hurriedly trained and sent off to the warfront. Apart from the reports on these air raids, I know them to be true because on many occasions I witnessed and sought shelter from them in bushes and/or bomb shelters.⁷ I clearly remember the first bombing of Ikot Ekpene in 1968 and the almost ceaseless strafing of Umuahia and its environs, also around 1968, when we resided there. Some other notorious air raids have been well documented and took place on the following dates (*circa*) and locations, resulting in several deaths and injuries:

- March 3, 1968: Saint Mary's Hospital, Urua Akpan, current Akwa Ibom State (two killed, 21 injured)
- March 5, 1968: Villages in Dere near Port Harcourt, current Rivers State (20 killed, several injured)
- April 5, 1968: Shopping center in Aba, current Abia State (26 killed, several injured)
- April 16, 1968: Village in suburbs of Arochukwu, current Abia State (42 killed, several injured)
- April 21, 1968: Church in Owerri, current Imo State (60 killed, several injured)
- April 22, 1968: Aba, current Abia State (120 killed, several injured)

⁷ In 1968 my mother almost lost her life when bombs were dropped in the vicinity of the Umuahia market. She had gone to the market in the company of Mrs. Ironsi, wife of the former head-of-state. In another such bombing incident a friend of my parents, Mrs. Nkele, was killed.

- April 23, 1968: Aba, current Abia State (75 killed, several injured)
- April 25, 1968: Umuahia, current Abia State (180 killed, hundreds injured)
- April 27, 1968: Aba, current Abia State (148 killed, several injured)
- May 3, 1968: Okigwe township and Orodo village in Owerri Division, current Imo State (36 killed, 75 wounded)
- May 6, 1968: Church missionary school, Assa in Ngwa Division, current Abia State (94 refugees killed, 65 wounded)
- May 7, 1968: Eleme near Port Harcourt, current Rivers State (19 killed, several injured)
- May 9, 1968: Umumasi and Umukoroshe (now Rumuomasi and Rumukoroshe) near Port Harcourt, current Rivers State (87 killed, several injured); Mbawsi and Okpuala, current Abia State (60 killed, 140 injured)
- May 11, 1968: Obehie market near Aba, current Abia State (27 killed, several injured); Ibiono, current Akwa Ibom State (four killed)
- May 12, 1968: Port Harcourt Shell BP residential area and Elelenwa near Port Harcourt, current Rivers State (120 killed, 250 injured)
- June 13, 1968: Abonnema, current Rivers State (45 killed, over 100 injured)
- September 2, 1968 (circa): Hospital at Ihiala, Current Anambra State (75 killed, 270 injured)
- September 6, 1968 (circa): Hospital and marketplace at Ihiala, current Anambra State (130 killed, 60 injured); hospitals at Ozubulu and Nnewi, current Anambra State (several killed)
- October 12, 1968: Leper Colony in Uzuakoli, current Abia State (47 killed, 102 injured)

- December 13, 1968: Streets, markets and fields in Umuahia, current Abia State (27 killed, 100 injured)
- December 21, 1968: Umuahia, current Abia State (43 killed, several injured)
- December 22, 1968: Three churches in Umuahia, current Abia State (28 killed)
- February 7, 1969: Afor Umohiagu village near Owerri (more than 300 killed, several injured)
- February 20, 1969: Umuahia, current Abia State (60 killed, several injured)
- February 21, 1969: Clinic at Amokwe Item, current Abia State (five pregnant women killed)
- February 24, 1969: Red Cross headquarters, hospital, clinic for convalescence and market place in Umuahia, present Abia State (several killed and injured); market in Eziana Mbano village; current Imo State (17 killed)
- February 26, 1969: Ozu Abam market and Ohafia Street in Umuahia, current Abia State (over 250 killed, several injured)
- March 2, 1969: Umuahia, present Abia State (five killed, eight injured)
- March 8, 1969 (circa): Urua Akpan and Ikot Umo Essien villages in Annang Province, current Akwa Ibom State (98 killed, 62 injured)
- March 11, 1969: Marketplace and town, Umuahia, current Abia State (35 killed)
- May 3, 1969: Umu-Ovaha, current Abia State (18 killed, 40 injured)
- September 8, 1969: Clinic in Ojoto, current Anambra State (16 killed)

September 17, 1968 was one of the bloodiest and gruesome days of the war. On that day, bombs were dropped on a marketplace, a clinic for kwashiorkor patients and a church in Otuocha Aguleri, killing an estimated 510 and injuring over a thousand.

There were also a series of non-bombing incidents, like the killing of civilians through cannon fire on roads and farms in Ikot Ekpene (current Akwa Ibom State) on March 6, 1968 (25 killed, several injured). On August 16, 1968 Nigerian soldiers massacred an estimated 2000 people at Owaza and 300 in Ozuaka, two villages lying between the Imo River and Aba town. On the same day in Awka, current Anambra State, Nigerian soldiers opened fire on refugee camps, slaughtering up to 375 refugees. Later that month, on August 27, civilians were murdered at Ogwe, near Aba, purportedly instigated by one Lieutenant Macaulay Lamurde. The next month, on September 10, 47 men were lined up and shot at the Afoagu market near Udi in current Anambra State for apparently refusing to declare their support for the enemy. A similar scenario was played out in Lokpa Village, Okigwe, present Imo State, when 60 individuals were lined up and shot in cold blood by Nigerian soldiers. These attacks were premeditated, merciless and anything but humane.⁸

How the enemy could reconcile its declarations of unity and “one Nigeria” with such sadism is as paradoxical as it is farcical. In the words of Raph Uwechue, “By bombing hundreds of civilians to death and destroying the homes and property of hundreds of thousands more, the Federal Government can hardly justify its claims to be protecting and liberating the very same people.”⁹

In September 1969, at the Addis Ababa Summit of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), President Julius Nyerere pushed the case for Biafra’s sovereignty. He seized the opportunity to recount the macabre conditions that Biafran civilians were subjected to:

⁸ Pauline Dean, *Biafra War Diary: Urua Akpan 1968* (Dublin: MMM Publications, n.d.), 4; Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, *Biafra: Selected Speeches of C. Odumegwu Ojukwu*, Vol. I (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 252-253, 342, 344, 345, 363, 383 & 384; Philip Efiog, *Nigeria and Biafra: My Story* (New York: African Tree Press, 2007), 262; Aneke, 218, 303-304, 318, 344, 350, 377, 378, 385, 386, 423, 427, 428, 429, 431, 438, 439, 468, 542. **Dates differ slightly from one source to another.**

⁹ Uwechue, 19.

The break-up of Nigeria is a terrible thing. But it is less terrible than that cruel war. Thousands of people are being shot, bombed or seeing their homes and livelihood destroyed; millions, including the children of Africa, are starving to death. (It is estimated that possibly more people have died in this war in the last two years than in Vietnam in the last ten years.)¹⁰

Even though the US demonstrated a largely lukewarm attitude to the gruesome war crimes that were being committed, one of its presidential candidates at the time, Richard Nixon, spoke out and observed that “genocide is what is taking place right now, and starvation is the grim reaper. This is not the time to stand on ceremony.”¹¹ He then called on President Lyndon Johnson to urgently invest ample time and energy to help alleviate the crisis and suffering. Though some could argue that Nixon’s comment was more political than sympathetic, he spoke the truth. The large scale carnage endured by Biafran civilians eventually captured the conscience of the international community and this was shockingly demonstrated on March 30, 1969 when a woman in Paris, France burned herself to death near the Nigerian Embassy to protest the genocide. A similar action was carried out by a Columbian University student, the 20 year old Bruce Mayrock who, on May 30 of the same year, burned himself to death near the United Nations (UN) Headquarters in New York while carrying a placard that read: “You Must Stop Genocide – Please Save Nine Million Biafrans.”¹²

The more they were decimated along with their communities, homes, businesses and means of livelihood, the more civilian populations became helpless and turned to refugee camps for sustenance. Yet, Biafra’s refugee crisis, as taxing as it was, also exhibited the resolve and

¹⁰ Julius K. Nyerere, “The Nigeria/Biafra Crisis” (paper presented at the OAU Summit, Addis Ababa, September 6, 1969).

¹¹ Quoted in Ojukwu, 344.

¹² Aneke, 481-482. Also see Raisa Simola, “Time and Identity: The Legacy of Biafra to the Igbo in Diaspora,” *Nordic Journal of African Studies* 9.1 (2000): 107.

indomitable survival spirit of its people, thanks to the countries that supported (or at least sympathized with) the Biafran cause, including Portugal, Gabon, Tanzania, Sao Tome, the Ivory Coast, Zambia, Ireland, France and Haiti. Within a year after the war began, refugee camps were hurriedly established throughout Biafra and were largely sustained by humanitarian organizations like Caritas International, Holy Ghost Fathers of Ireland (now Spiritans), the World Council of Churches, Joint Church Aid, Concern Worldwide, Catholic Relief Services, the Salvation Army and the International Red Cross among many others. All available space and amenities were employed for that purpose, whether they were makeshift, bamboo-constructed buildings or former school and government buildings. The grim reality; however, is that the refugees could not be guaranteed permanent shelter and were constantly itinerant as they had to seek safety from a persistent and merciless enemy that continued to make tremendous inroads into Biafra. Recounting her role as Reverend Sister and pediatrician in Biafra in 1968, Pauline Dean recalls the fall of Port Harcourt to the enemy and the initiation of fresh, bleak refugee problems:

A Father they met said there were STREAMS of refugees out of PH last week walking the 60 miles to Owerri. One woman delivered a baby at one village – got up and walked and delivered the twin at the next village. One twin died.... One woman delivered triplets – she and all the babies died. They were being strafed along the way.¹³

Dean goes on to describe her visit to a refugee camp set up in Ikot Ebok, also in present Akwa Ibom State. Though brief, her story conveys the overwhelming sense of anguish, lack, futility and despair that sometimes typified the camps and the refugees:

The children with kwashiorkor are terrible and are not getting better. Two people died in the camp yesterday. The women are very marasmic – scabies is epidemic. Water is a

¹³ Dean, 24.

problem as no one has come to fix the well. The stream is 3 miles away and many are too tired and weak to walk there. We brought a long rope for the bucket but it wasn't long enough to get water from the bore hole.... On a mat lying turned to the wall was a sick man. Dying – cold. I asked what was his name – no one knew....Pulse down to 40. No one knew how long he had been sick or what his symptoms were. All we could do was to baptize him.¹⁴

Luke Aneke documents the massive problem of “severe protein malnutrition” (kwashiorkor) that had to be dealt with at a hospital run by the Holy Rosary Sisters in Emekuku near Owerri. According to a *New York Times* report of the children’s wards, “All the children had yellowish, almost golden hair, scaling skin, body sores, swollen ankles and legs, diarrhea, lack of appetite, and an apathetic, lethargic look.”¹⁵ Another *New York Times* description of famine conditions in Biafra states that, “Death strikes everywhere: in hospitals, in mission stations, even by the roadside. At the Okpala Mission...Rev. Ken Doheny is close to weeping as 7,000 children assemble at dusk, their bony hands outstretched.” But there isn't nearly enough to feed them.¹⁶

Although I had been aware of and observed the horrors caused by air attacks and the rapidly growing food and health problems, nothing prepared me for the misery and agony I witnessed at Ifakala, a large village at the time in Mbitoli in modern Imo State. Umuahia had just fallen to the enemy and we relocated to Ifakala where we were temporarily accommodated by the family of my father’s first aide-de-camp. Here, the refugee camps were extensively deficient in medical and food supplies and epitomized the death, disease and malnutrition that were now widespread in Biafra. My recollections of these camps directly influenced the mood

¹⁴ Dean, 26-27.

¹⁵ Quoted in Luke Aneke, 236-237.

¹⁶ Quoted in Luke Aneke, 261.

and subject matter of my novel, *Monty*. I also dedicate a significant section of my unpublished memoir, *Biafran Boy*, to our Ifakala experience and the conditions of the refugee camps there. Below is an excerpt from the opening section of *Monty*, testimony to the continued impact of the sordid refugee camp images on my psyche many years after the war ended:

The War had doled out a crumbling sensation to the people. Within their walls they felt the sensation, and in their spirits too. As their lives crumbled, so did their walls. Like the once proud walls of the school—they weren't yet lying in complete ruins, but they were plastered with ugly scars and holes in no particular order. In those holes were a frenzied competition for space by spirited rats and sophisticated roaches. Those walls, painted with blood and pus and vomit and forgotten grime. Those walls, stained with laughter gone dry.

Because the filth had pierced their world so freely, they were desensitized to it. Monty wasn't born among the sick who were wrapped around each other; their misery shared in embraces cold and hard. He wasn't born among the dying who generously exchanged, in ignorance, the fruits of death. No, Monty wasn't born within those walls.

He was born away from the hunger that forced stillness. The refugees lay on their rags for hours, sometimes on naked concrete, sometimes naked, and stared. Even when mist formed over their eyes, the red broke through, along with thin lines of tear. But the lines dried up too quickly because their frail bodies carried little or no water. The stillness encircled them; it was one thick grip, and movement was either stifled or slowed. Even when measly ration found its way in, usually once a week, sometimes not at all, and the mad war for a bite raged, the stillness didn't die. There were those who just lay there in their nakedness and half nakedness, their dried-up, thin skins stretched frightfully by

their tired bones. They just stared, sometimes out of their sockets it seemed, their sunken eyes almost lost in two widening hollows.¹⁷

Yet, there were more vibrant camps, like the one we visited at Nto Edino towards the end of the war where the refugees were lively, well fed, well clothed and enjoyed considerable medical supplies. It was supervised by Father Isidore Umanah, who later became the Principal of Holy Family College, Abak; my alma mater. Some of the refugee youth formed mock armies and paraded around the compound with wooden and locally made rifles. Water supply was fairly constant and a generator supplied electricity at night. The refugees even put on a full length play before we left, accompanied by a traditional dance.

In the end, and despite the challenges they faced, the camps provided much needed sustenance, preserved many lives and ensured that Biafra didn't collapse sooner than it eventually did. The invaluable and selfless efforts of supporting humanitarian organizations were reinforced by the decision of sympathetic countries to provide sanctuary for Biafran refugees, particularly Gabon, the Ivory Coast, Sao Tome and Ireland. The beneficiaries were mostly children who were orphans and/or victims of starvation. While a number of these children were eventually returned to their parents, foster parents or relatives after the war, others were permanently separated from parents and family members that had either died or could not be traced. Still, there were those who stayed on in their host countries and this has given rise to modern communities in Gabon and the Ivory Coast that comprise a large number of Biafran descendants. Proximity and cultural considerations were key determinants for sending most refugees to Gabon and the Ivory Coast. Ireland also provided a safe haven for Biafran children, especially during the latter part of the war and even after the war, thanks to the Holy Ghost Fathers of Ireland whose mission among others was to ensure educational opportunity and

¹⁷ Philip Effiong, *Monty* (Bloomington: Author House, 2001), 1-2.

continuity for Biafran children. My two older sisters benefitted from this initiative and were sent to Ireland several months before the war ended. My oldest brother joined them shortly after. About four days before the war ended; me, my older and younger brothers, my mother and a cousin (along with some other Biafran families, including Ojukwu's extended family) boarded a seat-less cargo plane and flew to Sao Tome. This was the beginning of an adventure that would culminate in the transfer of me and my older brother to Ireland where we were reunited with our older siblings and spent five months under the care of a foster family.

Prior to Ireland, we spent a few months in Bouake, a city in the central part of the Ivory Coast. Here, we briefly attended school at one of the Biafran refugee facilities where classes were taught by a Catholic priest and former Biafran teachers. I made friends, interacted and played tirelessly with several boys. The liveliness of those refugees, their good health and willingness to embrace the renewed hope that they were offered, contrasted sharply with somber images of the Biafran refugee crisis, some of which have been well preserved in photos and films. It is testimony to the resolve and impregnable courage of the Biafran people as well evidence of the accomplishments of the countries and institutions that sacrificed so much to offset the dreadful effects of bombs and starvation.

Complementing the severe strategies that were designed to cripple Biafra's civilian population was the enemy's adoption of a unique "Quick kill" policy—a term used to describe the major role of the British Government in supplying arms to the federal side. The alleged purpose was to destroy and kill Biafrans "quickly" and in large numbers in order to facilitate a quick end to the war. The result was justification for utilizing the most gruesome and criminal methods to devastate Biafran populations.¹⁸

¹⁸ Michael Stafford, "Quick Kill In Slow Motion: The Nigerian Civil War," April 1, 1984, accessed November 6, 2010, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/1984/SMR.htm>.

In a recent visit to Ireland where I participated in a conference on Ireland and Biafran Refugees,¹⁹ I was honored to meet with a number of Catholic personnel and humanitarian workers who had worked tirelessly and selflessly to provide relief for suffering Biafrans. One of them, Father Dermot McCarthy, had secretly filmed a documentary titled, “Night Flight to Uli” (1968), which he managed to sneak out of Biafra. When it was shown in Ireland, it played a decisive role in stirring the Irish people to take action in support of destitute, sick and malnourished Biafrans. While this documentary captures some of the horrors that the people had to cope with, one can only imagine the many morbid situations that were never captured in pictures or films.

Unmasking a Ruthless Enemy

I will reiterate the maturity and professionalism exhibited by Biafran and Nigerian military governments at the end of the war. As stated earlier, compared to warring situations in several African countries (which have been messy and protracted), both warring sides flaunted representatives that were dignified in their acceptance of a peace agreement that would augur well for the people and country. Gowon’s diplomacy was one in a series of factors that resulted in relative stability. Others were: a) the fact that the man that led the Biafran delegation was neither Ojukwu nor Igbo (if Ojukwu had led the delegation he would have been tried and executed, if even a peace agreement was reached); b) the eagerness of the federal side to counter growing international allegations of human rights abuse and war crimes; and c) the largely civil, courageous and compliant manner in which the Biafran delegation brokered a peace deal with

¹⁹ The conference took place from 30 September-1 October 2010 and was held in the Moore Institute Seminar Room at the National University of Ireland in Galway.

the enemy (I say this because it was the Biafran delegation that faced the unenviable and potentially dangerous task of meeting the enemy on his home turf).

Other considerations will further negate the notion that Biafra was fortunate to deal with a kind enemy at the end of the war. With the surrender, Biafra was subdued and there was absolutely no desire or indication of further resistance, especially since Ojukwu had departed. If pockets of resistance persisted, the aggression would have continued against Biafra. We must remember that Gowon didn't (or couldn't?) quell the massacre of Easterners and the ensuing bloodshed in the North when he forcefully seized power in 1966. There is therefore no reason to believe that he would have successfully quelled any real efforts by his generals at further bloodshed after Biafra's surrender. I understand how the more extreme members of his cabinet didn't like a peaceful settlement, but their complaints, if any, were thin and hardly forceful. Ultimately, the vast majority of Nigerians and government officials were happy with the decision and believed that the country had experienced enough violence in the past three years. Even so, widespread incidents of rape, violence, lootings and killings were reported in the East after the war.²⁰ This is not information that was likely to be disseminated through the mainstream media, especially one controlled by those who won the war. But people of former Biafra have recounted such stories over and over again. I personally know of at least two families that lost people after the war. In the end, the reprisals didn't only come in the form of violence. There were issues like the abandoned property drama and the inability of Igbos to reclaim property they had owned in the North prior to the war. Also, though some former (relatively junior) Biafran officers were reabsorbed into the Nigerian military, they had to accept ranks well below their legitimate ranks while others were simply dismissed without any benefits in spite of for their years of service. Why, for instance, was Brigadier Hilary Njoku dismissed from the army at the end of the war?

²⁰ Aneke, 680.

He didn't participate in any coup and eventually disagreed vehemently with Ojukwu, for which he spent most of the war in detention. In one of Biafra's war songs he was accused along with Lieutenant Colonel Ifeajuna of selling his people for money. This was how virulent the Biafran people's bias was against Njoku regarding his "betrayal" of Ojukwu.

There are other prominent instances of continued victimization of former Biafrans and Biafran veterans, and for these victims the war has never ended. The crippled and destitute veterans who were parceled off to Oji River in present Enugu State after the war remain a prime example. Occupying a former colony for lepers, these abandoned and forgotten men mainly turned to begging as a source of sustenance. What has Gowon's brash "no victor, no vanquished" declaration meant to these veterans? How have they benefitted from alleged rehabilitation programs for ex-Biafrans by a benevolent former enemy?

Estimates indicate that one and a half to three million Biafrans lost their lives during the war. Most of them were non-combatant civilians, especially children, the elderly and women, who were victims of malnutrition and other grisly assaults. That a bloodbath did not take place in former Biafra at the end of the war is therefore little consolation and for this no Easterner owes Gowon or his regime an iota of gratitude. What was left to destroy or kill in Biafra anyway? Was there any more blood to spill? Those Gowon admirers and apologists who applaud his magnanimity and kindness act as if the post-war reconciliation (however harmonious) is enough to compensate for the millions that died under his leadership, mostly through methods that were genocidal and criminal. They are like those who honor and exonerate de Klerk and his cohorts because they freed Mandela and renounced apartheid, notwithstanding the thousands that had died, been tortured, jailed falsely and economically oppressed under the system that they championed. Would they be eager to sing Gowon's praises and eulogize his government if it

were their communities, parents, siblings, lands and property that had been pummeled by rockets and Russian bombers?

Praises Gone Awry

I must disagree; therefore, with the general thesis of Max Siollun's essay, "Nigeria's Post-Civil War Reconciliation,"²¹ in which he foregrounds Gowon as a gentleman and compassionate leader. While I respect Max Siollun for his tremendous contributions to history, especially Nigerian history, this essay fails to achieve an in-depth analysis of a number of sociopolitical and economic realities. Siollun offers a number of flawed examples to buttress his perceptions of Gowon as magnanimous and considerate. When, for instance, he mentions the former head-of-state's decision to hire an Igbo officer (a pilot) who once fought for Biafra, he fails to give pertinent details and we are left without a strong grasp of the circumstances that led to the appointment. Besides, are we to overtly focus on this single appointment and ignore the many Easterners, mainly Igbos, that were dismissed from the military without benefits and in spite of the many years that they had devoted to the service of the nation?

I have already debunked the notion that former Biafrans were not slaughtered at the end of the war because they were dealing with a kind and gentle enemy; so, I will not belabor this issue, which constitutes part of Siollun's thesis. Hitler's intention was to eliminate the Jews and his regime would have strived to achieve that if he had won the war. The intention of Gowon's regime was not to eliminate the Igbos or Easterners but to thoroughly subdue them to the point of gaining control of crude oil in the present Niger Delta. Once this was achieved, it made no sense to continue to wage war.

²¹ Max Siollun, "Nigeria's Post-Civil War Reconciliation," *Kwenu! Our Culture, Our Future*, January 19, 2009, accessed November 20, 2010, http://www.kwenu.com/publications/siollun/nigeria_postwar_reconciliation.htm.

On the subject of mutual respect engendered by Gowon's clemency, which is another point advanced by Siollun; there is little or no credit to this claim. Siollun's position here is reminiscent of Gowon's speech at the launch of Luke Aneke's book, *The Untold Story of the Nigeria-Biafra War*, which took place in Abuja in 2008. I was at the event and listened to Gowon reiterate that it was his great admiration for the Igbos that compelled him to take extreme steps to ensure that they didn't break away from Nigeria. Considering his lackadaisical attitude during the massacres in the North and the vicious tactics he employed against Biafran civilians, he certainly had a bizarre way of expressing his respect and admiration for Igbos. His point was as ludicrous as his assertion that he didn't expect the weapons he acquired from Russia to be as destructive as they eventually were. How ridiculous, especially coming from a man who was not just a trained soldier but a general at the time.

The respect that Siollun refers to sounds great on paper but at best it is illusory. The consistent and pervasive image of Biafrans by those who were their enemy is of a misled, overambitious and disruptive people who tried to tear Nigeria apart. About three years ago when my mother made several trips to Abuja to receive promised retirement funds on behalf of her late husband, she and others who were on a similar mission were typically greeted at the Army Headquarters by soldiers who would sarcastically announce that "Ojukwu people don come."²² These insults were taking place 30+ years after the war ended and my mother was over 70 at the time.

Genuine respect for Biafra could have come by way of recognition and acclamation for its innovation, as well as a decision by the federal side to tap from and build on its technological achievements. Under tremendous pressure and danger, Biafran scientists had displayed a creative, ingenious, determined and courageous spirit that remains unmatched in Africa and most

²² In creolized Nigerian English this essentially means, "Ojukwu's cronies are here."

of the world. They produced weapons, ammunition, matches, clothing, engine oil, dyes, foodstuff, shoe polish, soap and other personal hygienic needs with local materials that were often in short supply. But most amazingly, they successfully built oil refineries at Uzuakoli (present Abia State) and Amandugba (present Imo State), which were estimated to refine up to 50,000 gallons of fuel per day. Interestingly, none of these locations are considered traditional oil producing areas. (In addition, smaller portable refineries were scattered throughout Biafra, some of which were built by army divisions.)²³ This feat is even more phenomenal when one considers that modern, peaceful Nigeria cannot boast of a single refinery that operates efficiently. But in order to discredit and criminalize Biafra as well as refuse to give it a semblance of legitimacy, Gowon's regime and subsequent post-war governments have intentionally snubbed these inventions and failed to exploit the talents that created them.

On the other hand, former Biafrans waste little or no respect on those that had so sadistically ravaged their communities and people. To this day the pain is still fresh in the minds of many. After the war it was even fresher and conjured anything but respect for Gowon and his army.

Gowon was not the "only officer acceptable to the majority of the population and army" as Siollun also asserts. His rise to the position of head-of-state was not based on his popularity; it was political and the direct result of a bloody coup. The coup was predominantly executed by Northerners and he was the highest ranking officer from the North. So, which majority of the population and army is Siollun talking about (except he is excluding the East from that equation)? When you carry out a coup successfully, the "majority" of the people and the military have no choice but to "accept" you because you forcefully impose yourself on them.

²³ Aneke, 435.

But perhaps most outrageous is Siollun's reference to Gowon's former Igbo girlfriend, Edith Ike, who he identifies as further proof that Gowon respected Igbos. Is it not possible to like what's between a lady's legs and not like the lady? It therefore goes without saying that it is possible to like what's between a lady's legs and not like her people. Gowon's personal relationship with Edith Ike was for his own emotional and perhaps physical gratification. Only he and Edith gained from that relationship; it was not of benefit to the larger Igbo or Eastern community.

Conclusion

After the war, the Gowon administration continued to carry out a campaign of vengeance against those that had provided humanitarian aid to Biafra; harassing, detaining and expelling several foreign Catholic personnel (mostly Irish), some of whom had served in the country for up to 20 years. It also extended its vindictiveness to countries that were sympathetic to Biafra and refused the material assistance that they offered to help rebuild lives in parts of Eastern Nigeria that had been ravaged by the war. These humanitarian organizations did not supply Biafra with military weapons and if supportive governments did, they were certainly minimal and inconsequential. In his broadcast after Biafra's formal surrender, Gowon couldn't suppress his rage against the countries and institutions that had frustrated his ruthless intentions:

There are a number of foreign governments and organizations whose so-called assistance will not be welcome. These are the Governments and Organizations which sustained the rebellion. They are thus guilty of the blood of thousands who perished because of the prolongation of the futile rebel resistance. They did not act out of love for humanity. Their purpose was to disintegrate Nigeria and Africa and impose their will on us. They

may still harbor their evil intentions. We shall therefore not allow them to divide and estrange us again from one another within their dubious and insulting gifts and their false humanitarianism.²⁴

Gowon's tirade against the "former governments and organizations" with "evil intentions" smacks of exasperation and is devoid of truth. This is why he was quick to blame them for the deaths of thousands, charging them with crimes he was guilty of while subtly vindicating himself.

Contrary to the contention of intellectuals and historians like Siollun, former Biafrans (and their descendants) are not satisfied and neither are they pleased with Gowon's purported kindness. Many of them remain indignant and continue to ask questions that reveal their lasting bitterness. Some have gone to the extent of resurrecting Biafra, even if symbolically, and this has given rise to the formation of modern pro-secessionist organizations. Prominent among these are: Biafraland, Coalition of Igbo and Biafra Organizations (CIBO), Biafra Foundation, Biafra Government in Exile, Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Biafra Actualization Forum, Biafra Liberation Movement (BLM) and Biafra Committee for Immediate Action (BCIA). These organizations are apparently passionate about their vision and continue to spread their doctrines and philosophies by effectively exploiting the electronic and other media. On September 29, 2001 a Biafra House was formally opened in Washington, DC and serves as a rallying point for pro-Biafran activities and ideals. Also in DC,

²⁴ A.H.M. Kirk-Greene, *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: 1967-1970*, Vol. 2 (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 457-461. Also see Aneke, 607.

a radio broadcast service; Voice of Biafra International (VOBI) has been operational since September 2001 and is slated to continue broadcasting once a week.²⁵

Countries like Rwanda, the Sudan and Liberia have received extensive global attention in response to war crimes and human rights abuses committed against their peoples. Yet, no attention has been paid to the Nigeria-Biafra War which took place long before the conflicts in these countries. When will the genocide and pogrom committed against Nigeria's Easterners be addressed on any significant scale, whether internationally or locally? Until this happens, the indignations that exist will not dissipate and several thousands, if not millions, will continue to rage while new groups will emerge and express their discontentment in a variety of ways. Whether these groups eventually succeed or not at secession, they illustrate the truth that even though the war ended 40 years ago, people are not prepared to simply walk away and ignore the truth that someone should be held accountable for the innocent blood that was generously spilled before and during the conflict. As Raph Uwechue points out, "The collapse of Biafra put an end to the military aspect of the Nigerian drama. But the end of the war has not removed the cause of a conflict born of long-standing political problems.... It is on the type of solution achieved that depends the political future of Nigeria."²⁶

²⁵ "Republic of Biafra: The Case for Self-Determination," November 2001, accessed November 25, 2010, www.biafraland.com/biafracase.ppt.

²⁶ Uwechue, 13-14.

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Per-review Comment:

This is an excellent essay by an eye-witness. It is an original story told by one who experienced the ordeals of Biafra. It is a plausible documentation of some of the atrocities of the Nigerian government and her foreign collaborators during the Nigeria Biafra war. Some may question the excessive use of the first person "I" in the article, thus impugning its objectivity, but this point of view is inevitable given that the author is offering the reader the rare privilege of hearing from someone who went through the inhuman condition in Biafra. As one who experienced the same ordeals, I am amazed by the coincidence of experiences as I read about very familiar events the author recorded in this essay. It is the authenticity of those specifics of which I am familiar that attests to the veracity of the author's entire narrative.

The Anglo-Nigerian conspiracy against the Igbo during the Biafra war remains one of the most inexcusable crimes against humanity, only second to the Jewish holocaust. Yet the world has gone on as if it never happened, simply because the victims resigned their fate to the whims of the Nigerian oligarchs in a world that pretended that they don't exist.

I therefore recommend this to anyone seeking true understanding of the genocidal treatment meted on the Igbo in Nigeria during that war, in a period when the rest of world, except a handful of countries, was asleep while British-sponsored evil roamed wild in the Lower Niger Delta of Nigeria.

Chieke E. Ihejirika , Ph. D
Associate Professor of Political Science
Lincoln University, PA