

# Faith-Based Humanitarian Intervention: The Catholic Church and the Biafran Refugee Crisis during the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970

Edidiong Ekefre

**Abstract**—The Nigerian Civil War was one of the foremost postcolonial conflicts in West Africa that attracted a serious humanitarian problem due to an unprecedented refugee crisis that affected the Biafran region. Due to its geographical location, the Nigerian government used blockades and starvation as a weapon of war against the Biafran. Faced with strong opposition from the Nigerian government, most humanitarian organizations withdrew their support from Biafra, whose death toll was rapidly growing daily due to starvation, malnutrition, and chronic ailment. Thus, the Catholic Church, a major Christian denomination in Biafra, had to see it as its religious obligation to support the humanitarian needs of the Biafrans. Thus, applying oral history methods with archival research, this paper examines the humanitarian activities of the Catholic Church in the Nigerian civil war. It contends that the Catholic Church was a key player in the humanitarian aspect of the Nigerian civil war. The paper concludes that faith-based humanitarian intervention in the Biafran refugee crisis was essential for the survival of the Biafran war-stricken women and children.

**Keywords**—Refugee crisis, humanitarian intervention, caritas international, blockades, airlifts, starvation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE Nigerian civil war posed an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in twentieth-century West Africa. The precarious situation displaced people from their homes. Some people survived in the woods for weeks and months, while others travelled long distances for food and clothing [1]-[4]. Little children dropped dead; nursing mothers abandoned their babies. Some persons indulged in cannibalism<sup>1</sup>, while others ate “unclean” animals [5]-[7]. They ate grass and drank unhealthy water—all in a bid to stay alive. In overcrowded refugee camps, children with kwashiorkor, measles, and whooping cough were dying in their numbers. The war reduced human life to a state of no value while the belligerents acted with heartless cruelty [8]-[11]. The international community only acted based on what they stood to gain or lose. When the situation was dire, the international community, for fear of offending the federal military government of Nigeria, turned a blind eye to the pain and agony of young children and agonizing mothers who knew nothing about the cause and course of the war but were malignly ravaged by it [12].

Confronted with the shocking spectacle of the war, the Catholic Church which was the dominant Christian

denomination in Biafra could not be indifferent to the crisis. Thus, the local faith communities were motivated to spring into humanitarian actions in an attempt to give succour to the suffering Biafrans. This goes a long way to confirm the claims of Kidwa and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh that “local faith communities are often the first responders to communities affected by conflict and displacement, providing food, shelter, and other material needs in addition to providing spiritual and pastoral support” [13], [14]. It did not only call on the opposing sides severally to lay down their arms and negotiate a peaceful and honourable settlement; it was significantly involved in those aspects of the war that championed humanitarian actions [15]. After all futile efforts to broker peace between the warring parties, Nigeria and Biafra, the Church stood by the war-affected people through humanitarian services in every possible way. Notwithstanding the disastrous state of anarchy, most of the missionaries maintained their duty posts to defend the lives of the people, especially women, children, the sick, and the wounded, by rendering a genuine humanitarian intervention. This was necessitated as the federal military government exploited economic blockade as a weapon of war. The Catholic Church defied the blockade by making airlifts, mostly at night into the Biafran enclaves. Despite the effort made by the Catholic Church to airlift food into the Biafran enclaves, the food crisis in Biafra was still at unprecedented proportions. Children were the worst hit as most of them died of starvation and hunger-related diseases. To ameliorate the high level of infant mortality in Biafra, the Church worked with other charity organisations to give succour to the suffering people of Biafra. These specific interventions of the Catholic Church in the Nigerian civil war constitute the focus of this paper.

For its primary sources, the study utilises a wide range of ethnographic interviews making it possible to present the complex experiences of the people with richer and more nuanced accounts of the Catholic Church as a faith community in the Biafran humanitarian crisis. Through eye-witnesses accounts, the study engages with people at the grassroots in what Paul Thompson and Stephen Humphries describe as ‘history from below,’ giving history back to the people in their own words and building for them a future of their own making [16], [17]. The research also employs data from both private and public archives as they offer a background to past evidence. Being a primary source of data collection, it offers significant

Edidiong Ekefre is with Akwa Ibom State University, Nigeria (e-mail: edidiongekere38@gmail.com).

<sup>1</sup> Note: Not all acts of cannibalism were motivated by hunger, in a place like Ugebe in the present-day Cross River State, it was a custom for the natives to eat the flesh of their captured enemies especially in the time of war, see [7].

historical findings and provides source accountability. The 'archival digital revolution,' the digitisation of archival materials provides a breakthrough in this study, increases discoverability, and allows for quicker, easier, and more in-depth research. With archival research, the paper has analysed the archival sources into up-to-date knowledge on faith-based humanitarian intervention in the Biafran refugee crisis.

## II. THE BIAFRAN HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

The humanitarian crisis in Nigeria preceded the Nigerian civil war. It dates to the 1966 pogrom and the mandatory return of Nigerians to their regions of origin. Before the war broke out, many easterners fled from the north, west, and other geographical locations to their eastern homeland. The situation filled various towns and villages in Igboland with returnees. For the first time in Nigerian history, the condition created a severe human displacement and refugee problem in the then Eastern Region [18]-[21]. Most returnees were born and bred in the north and other parts of the country and had lost touch with their homeland. The majority could not locate their ancestral parentage in Igboland. Many returnees had lost their property while others were either impaired or maimed, making it difficult for them to settle down in their homeland [19], [22], [23].

The Catholic Church encouraged the relatives of the returnees to accommodate them. The Church provided shelter in parishes for those who could not find a place to stay in their family houses. Those who could fit into society were taken care of by their respective Catholic parishes. As the crisis worsened, making the extended family system overstretch its extremes, the Church took it upon itself to allocate habitations to the refugees. To that effect, the Church often used mission school buildings as refugee centres [25], [23]. The Church authorities joined other Christian bodies, voluntary agencies, and the government in the first efforts to provide succour to hundreds of thousands of returnees. This aid took various forms such as medical care, food supply, clothes, shoes, money, accommodation, and personal care. At times they were given directly to the refugees in different parishes and rehabilitation centres where they settled. In some cases, they were given through government agencies specially formed for the care of refugees [18].

In response to the refugee crisis, the Catholic Church began the dimension of life, less stressed before the war, *diaconia*, service. It emphasised solidarity and help to people 'uprooted' from their initial homes, the internally displaced people, the sick and the wounded [19]. During this period, there were over a million refugees under the care of the Eastern regional government [24], [21]. To assist the government, the Catholic Church and other Christian Churches convened a special meeting in Benin on 7 October 1966 to discuss the refugee crisis. The Church leaders agreed to establish a special fund known as 'The Christian Churches Refugee Fund.' Thus, they made appeals for fund-in-aid for the evacuees on Sunday, 30 October 1966. "Out of a total sum of £6,541 collected in some fourteen dioceses in the South, the following dioceses in the East – Onitsha, Calabar, Enugu, Ikot Ekpene, Ogoja, Owerri, Port Harcourt and Umuahia – together contributed £5,575

within two months" [18, p.359].

When the war eventually broke out, the Nigerian Church was already exhausted by the pre-war refugee crisis. Thus, they invited *Caritas Internationalis*, a Catholic relief agency, to the scene. Before the war, Nigerians did not know much about the term *Caritas*. As Arinze narrated in an interview, that, as a young bishop, it was more difficult for him to get information about Caritas than the older bishops since the Nigeria-Biafra war began in July 1967, two days after his episcopal ordination. Thus, with the Biafran refugee crisis, Catholic hierarchies in Nigeria began to realize the importance of the Church as a community that is in solidarity with the refugees and other displaced persons, the sick, aged, handicapped, imprisoned, suffering, and homeless. That whole humanitarian dimension of the Church began to grow rapidly in the face of the crisis through the activities of Caritas International. The growth was so impactful on the people that during the war, people began to name their children *Caritas* [19].

The war brought its sufferings on the Church as many Catholics fled and became refugees while the soldiers occupied many mission houses and schools [26]. Nevertheless, the war years remain the Church's most 'glorious hour' as its humanitarian services gained more popularity during the war [27]. On this ground, the Catholic Bishop of Ikot Ekpene, Dominic Ekandem, turned most of his station churches and schools into refugee camps and fast-food spots for the refugees [28]. The educational system was also affected. The Church and government deserted some school compounds and turned others into refugee or military camps and barracks [29].

When the crisis became unbearable, the Church began to call for foreign assistance. Thus, at the beginning of 1968, Archbishop Arinze assigned an Irish priest, Fr. Anthony Byrne, to oversee the humanitarian services in Onitsha Archdiocese. He sent Byrne to Rome, to the Secretariat of State of the Holy See to render a report on the humanitarian crisis and ask for assistance. He contacted the main offices, and the organization assigned to assist in the humanitarian crisis in Nigeria was *Caritas Internationalis* [30], [31]. Gradually, the Church instituted centres for humanitarian services in the various dioceses across Biafra. That is how the relief work began until it became incredibly significant as the years of the war rolled on and the suffering of the people got intense. It brought in other Catholic relief agencies from Germany, Britain, and Italy [19], [32], [33]. The same priest, Anthony Byrne, whose name became a household name in Biafra, organized the flights that imported relief materials to Biafra. The Church did not only rely on classical humanitarianism; it also introduced resilient humanitarianism by encouraging people to adapt to the conflict situation by embarking on internal food production. For instance, Arinze made it mandatory for all Catholic missionaries and heads of Catholic schools to start using all available mission lands for massive food production. The aim was to proffer a long-term solution to the food crisis in Biafra [34].

At the peak of the conflict, when the war went into a stalemate and the federal government restricted airlifts in the Biafran region, the Island of Sao Tome was always busy in

preparation for “illegal” airborne operations of relief materials into the Biafran enclaves. The warehouses were busy from morning to night. The airlift pioneered by Caritas attracted help from many quarters. The World Council of Churches also supported Caritas from the background. The two organizations worked together using the same pilots and planes. Supplies came from many sources, with the Catholic Relief Services of America, Ireland’s Joint Family Biafra Appeal, England’s OxFam, Germany’s Misereo, and other organizations contributing generously. International Red Cross had a similar airlift from the Island of Fernando Po.

Biafra’s desperate struggle against starvation happened to have touched the hearts and consciences of the world. A fantastic achievement sprung from such a modest beginning of Fr Tony Byrne. He came to Africa to preach and baptise but ended up directing an airline that supplied food to the war-ravaged region of Biafra [34]. There was an overwhelming response from Church humanitarian agencies and other private organisations unprecedented in African history. Notable among the charity organisations that were active in Biafra were Caritas International, representing the Catholic Church; International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC); and the World Council of Churches (WCC), a Protestant organisation representing some 28 Christian denominations and 17 industrial nations [35].

Arinze recalls that Caritas International alone reached its height such that in one night, about forty relief flights landed at Uli airport from Gabon. Though it was not forty flights every night, forty was its height during the war that ended in 1970 [19]. Most of the goods imported were from sea ferries from Ireland. Among the ship that got relief material from Irish shores to the Biafran region was Irish Rose. The sea ferry left the Port of Dublin to Biafra on 15 November 1968 to duck in Gabon, where flights would convey its content to the Biafrans. Organized by Joint Biafra Family, the people of Ireland loaded Irish Rose with food and other palliatives for the war-stricken people of Biafra. It transported items such as milk powder, assorted fish, potato flakes, tin meat, blankets, clothing, and medical supplies, magnanimously donated by Irish people to the Biafrans. As of 1968, such a ferry at regular intervals was the hope of millions of Biafrans dying of starvation [36], [37].

Accordingly, the enormous contributions from the people of Ireland channelled to Biafra through night flights contributed to keeping the people of Biafra alive in no small measure, without prejudice to the possibility of the Biafran government siphoning some of the money meant for relief materials for illegal importation of weaponry [38]. At best, they operated the flights at night to avert the risk of being shut down by the Nigerian anti-aircraft bombers. It was a risky adventure, but the perpetrators had one aim in view, saving human life [36]. These flights were necessary for the critical days of Biafra since food, clothes, medicine, and even fundamental things like salts and drinking water were difficult to come by. While sugar was a luxury, salt was exceptionally essential as lack of it plagued the Biafran children with malnutrition-related diseases. Hence, the donors soaked the piles of stockfish sent from Gabon with salts extracted for cooking. Where there was even a cup of tea to be taken, such was done without sugar. Thus, the people realised

through Catholic missionaries that religious humanitarianism was an inevitable aspect of Catholicism [39]-[41].

The American Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, Joseph Palmer II, observed that the civil war in Nigeria resulted in an escalating death rate daily. Such deaths were caused by air raids and gunshots in the battlefields or combat lines, as well as starvation and malnutrition in towns, villages, and the countryside. Millions of unfortunate victims: men, women, and children, paid the ultimate price for the war with their lives. The number of people dying of starvation in the Biafran region proved that even at its peak, the relief materials brought to the war enclaves were not enough to save millions of lives that depended on them. Hence, what the global community did to assuage the anguish of the war was like a drop from an ocean. The flow of material assistance was quite inadequate. What the people needed most was an atmosphere of peace which was far off from the centre of the war [42]. While some well-meaning mediators were still searching for peace, Palmer II indicated a need for substantial relief supplies to continue. Hence, humanitarian workers accumulated foodstuffs in large quantities both within the federal territories and the Islands offshore of Biafra like Gabon.

The US government also donated cash and relief materials to the tune of about \$9 million. Also, private American voluntary organizations made a cash donation of approximately \$2.7 million. Furthermore, the American Ambassador C. Robert Moore and the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs headed a U.S. delegation to Geneva to meet with the ICRC and other organizations concerned with relief. The conference aimed to see how best the relief funds and other palliatives could help the war-ravaged people. Thus, the ICRC shared the US concern and awareness of the gravity and magnitude of the problem and decided to take some vital steps to meet it [42], [43]. In most cases, the contributions channelled through the federal military government did not reach Biafra in actuality. The reasons are obvious: the federal military government was not in favour of sending any relief material to the Biafrans since it contributed to the prolongation of the war. The Nigerian government had already blockaded the Biafran region by sea, land, and air, thereby using starvation as a weapon of war. More so, the Biafran government, for fear of genocide, rejected an offer of sending palliatives to them through the federal government of Nigeria. Thus, religious-based humanitarian intervention was automatically, the most reliable source of humanitarian relief for Biafrans.

Further, during the Biafran refugee crisis, there was a problem of creating refugee camps for internally displaced people from the non-Igbo Provinces of Old Calabar, Ogoja and Port Harcourt. They moved into Ikot Ekpene and Igbo enclaves after the invasion of federal troops. Most refugees stayed in conditions that were so appalling and worse than that of pigs in a sty [6], [44], [28]. Such adverse condition was consequential to the fact that most palliatives donated through the Biafran government were channelled to the Igbo-majority areas to the negligence of the non-Igbos in the minority regions. This condition could not but arouse the concern of some charity organizations, especially the Church, who felt obliged to, in its

way, salvage the situation. Hence, Philip Effiong, the last commander of Biafra who happened to come from the ethnic minority of Ibibioland, concluded that the establishment of refugee camps in Ikot Ekpene and its environs by the Catholic Church contributed a great deal to the survival of thousands of people in the non-Igbo regions of the present-day Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Rivers, and Bayelsa States [6].

People from Rivers State alone who settled in two refugee camps in Ikot Ekpene were about 8,000. About 20,000 people from Southeastern State settled in Ikwen and Nto Edino camps waiting for foreign palliatives, which, most often, never came. Hence, in collaboration with the Biafran Administrator of Annang Province, Chief Ekukinam Bassey in Ikot Ekpene, Bishop Ekandem of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene delegated two of his priests to take charge of the refugee crisis in the region. The Church would not have achieved any success in the refugee crisis in Ikot Ekpene without the cooperation of the local people through the coordination of indigenous priests such as Isidore Umanah and Sylvanus Etok under the watch of Bishop Ekandem. They assisted in distributing palliatives to the displaced persons in the Church-established refugee camps. With the shortage of foreign aid, the priests went to parishes in the less affected areas to gather food materials for the refugees [6], [28], [44]-[47]. This contribution from the local population proves that the people did not solely depend on foreign aid and become hapless receptacles of foreign charity. In their little practice, they did their best to help themselves in times of dire need. No doubt, some of the refugees tried to migrate to the core Igbo enclaves with the hope of benefitting from foreign palliatives. Still, some Igbo civil activists tagged them saboteurs and killed them along the way. The situation heightened the fear that Igbo victory would mean total conquest of the minority ethnic groups in the embattled Biafran republic [6, p.211], [22, p.242].

Regarding medical challenges, several voluntary agencies, health practitioners and some medical doctors from different relief organizations, though numerically limited, equally rendered their services to the people of Biafra [48], [49]. Many hospitals throughout the Southeastern and the East-Central States were closed, abandoned, and looted as the federal army advanced and captured towns and villages along the way. The Nigerian armed forces took over St Theresa's Hospital Ikot Abasi as military barracks, while St Luke's Hospital Anua was temporarily abandoned in the face of multiple air raids [29], [51], [52]. Victims of war casualties crowded the Mater Dei Hospital Abakaliki. Consequently, the workload became extraordinarily heavy for the only resident doctor, Dr Godfrey Hinds, who was closely assisted by the Sisters of the Medical Missionaries of Mary. However, for some nurses and other staff in the Mater Dei Hospital, the enormity of the casualties was entirely out of proportion to the health workers [50], [53]-[55]. Hence, the mission medical workers transferred the wounded soldiers in the Abakaliki and other sectors to Afikpo. With the increasing numbers, it became necessary to open the seminary buildings beside the mission wards to house the sick, the wounded, and those recovering. According to Rory O'Brien, "Among those were soldiers suffering from shell shock who

wrote their needs and wants on blackboards on the walls. There was general laughing and rejoicing any morning that some of these soldiers could once again hear and speak, and they amused us as they acted out their recovery in song and dance" [53].

One of the federal policies that had significant effects on the Biafrans during the war was the economic blockades and starvation as a weapon of war against the civilian population. Thus, many volunteer bodies organised blockade-breaking relief flights into Biafra, carrying food, medicines, and other relief materials into the Biafran regions [23], [56]. On this ground, the federal government accused humanitarian workers of prolonging the war, thereby contributing to the death of more than 180,000 civilians [58]. More than 700,000 people were living in school compounds converted to refugee camps. Based on the Biafran Rehabilitation Commission report, relief workers absorbed a far greater number of refugees to the tune of about 5 million people in Biafran villages. Such humanitarian stride was a product of traditional African communalism, an overstretch of the extraordinarily elastic hospitality of the extended family relationship [59], [58].

From April to June 1968, the ring began to close around the Biafrans with further advances of the federal army on the two northern fronts. The Nigerian troops captured Port Harcourt on 19 May 1968. With the capture of Port Harcourt and its environs, the federal government tightened the sea blockade on the Biafran region. Accordingly, the humanitarian disaster became more severe, leading to widespread hunger and starvation of unprecedented proportion in the besieged Igbo areas, especially when the federal army invaded Anambra Division; the Awka-Onitsha highway was closed as the federal troops attacked Otuocha in 1969 [18, p.371]. The blockade resulted in the starvation of a good number of civilians, including women and children in the Biafran enclaves. Many were plagued by kwashiorkor and infective hepatitis [60]. This rapid increase in infant mortality rate heightened the passion and zeal of Catholic relief workers, whose humanitarian services were hindered by the federal military government. They broke the blockades to supply palliatives to the affected people [6, p.252/3], [49]. In the Southeastern State alone, even after being liberated by the federal troops, there were hundreds of thousands of homeless people. Many people lost homes and capital goods and were devoid of any means of producing articles of trade. The rehabilitation committee of the Southeastern State catered for about five hundred thousand displaced persons [61]. The Church in the Southeastern State, comprising Calabar and Ikot Ekpene dioceses, obtained most of their relief materials locally while those supplied by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Oxfam and Caritas only served as supplements [62], [61]. The focus of most international humanitarian organizations was on the Igbo-dominated Biafran enclaves outside federal control.

According to Staunton, between June and September 1969, about 3,561 Caritas-organised flights landed in Uli, a makeshift Biafran airport [63]. Caritas continued with its mission, taking recourse to night flights to Uli [64], [36], [3]. The decision to establish a blockade against the secessionists was to cut the

Biafrans off from food and communication with the outside world and separate them from having access to the oil wells in the captured regions. The Nigerian government blockaded the air and seaports, foreign currency transactions, mail, and telecommunications such that it affected international businesses, especially oil [65]. To further consolidate the embargo, the Nigerian government agreed with the Cameroonian government to suppress movements across the Biafran borders. They used the Cameroon gendarmes for border control against the free movement of Biafrans in the creeks of Cameroon. They also used the gendarmes as secret police in Biafran villages across the border to prevent more massive cross-border transfers of goods and people [66].

When the Nigerian government threatened to shut down relief planes, no company agreed to join the Biafran relief operations. They considered it a hazardous operation, as it was. Caritas had to buy planes to prove to other aircraft companies that the Biafran relief operation was worthwhile. Caritas' resolve seemed to have been inspirational to other airline companies, including Trans-Sweden and Trans-France, who joined the airlift operation. Another reason for the initial reluctance of most international airlines was that many people thought that Biafra would only last for a short time. During this period, it cost Caritas about \$75,000.00 to purchase a new flight. For the running cost, the charge of one plane from Sao Tome to Biafra cost approximately \$2,900.00. As of November 1968, Caritas had discharged up to 850 operations in Nigeria [36]. It carried out these operations for the sake of the ordinary civilian population, the women and the children who were starving and depended on their food. Caritas remained committed to the idea that the children had the right to live. They committed no crimes, nor did they know the meaning of economic blockade, secession, or independence. All they needed was survival which practically depended on relief materials from abroad while the war persisted [36]. They needed food and medication. It was, therefore, a moral obligation of Caritas through the auspice of the Catholic Church to keep them alive.

It is worth noting that the Catholic Church was not the only institution with issues with the Nigerian government on importing relief materials to Biafra. The ICRC was not without difficulties, not only with the Nigerian authorities but also with the surrounding African countries influenced by the Nigerian government. For instance, on 23 December 1968, the ICRC aircraft operating between the Island of Fernando Po and Biafra was halted by the government of Equatorial Guinea without any stipulated reason. On this ground, the representative of the ICRC, Mr August Lindt, had a meeting with the governing authority of Equatorial Guinea in Santa Isabel on the way forward for ICRC operations to Biafra via the region [66, p.7]. Before this meeting, the last flights en route to Biafra via Fernando Po arrived on the nights of 20-21 December 1968. For such a break, the conflict deprived about 850,000 people of their daily ration. Accordingly, the break-in operation was enough to increase the number of people dying of hunger within the intervening time [66]. Hence, they principally depended on the Catholic Church for their material sustenance. The fear of the

growing mortality rate was also the anxiety of the US government. They observed that the absence of ICRC operation in the region would cause a high level of casualties as the Church relief operations were not enough to soothe the anguish of the Biafran situation with its enormity.

In the interim, charitable services were subjected to a humanitarian dilemma. Those who broke the federal blockade to supply food to the Biafrans were accused of despising Nigeria's territorial sovereignty and supporting Biafra's resistance as well as prolonging the war. On the other hand, those who respected Nigerian authority and backed out of the relief mission were accused of assisting the federal side to commit genocide against Biafra by starvation [67]. The starvation crisis was at its peak with the fall of Port Harcourt in 1968. The blockade was more severe as the federal troops safeguarded the seaway. Since the federal government blockaded the land, the only option was the airstrip, and the safest time was night [68], [69]. This further strained the relations between the Church and the federal government.

The Nigerian government's excessive suspicion of the action of the ICRC and Caritas International on the grounds of importation of arms under the guise of relief materials made them attack non-military flights and other humanitarian cargos [70]. According to the *Daily Times-Independent* newspaper of 7 June 1969, the DC.6 aircraft shot down by the Nigerian Air Force using MiG warplane around Eket, 30 miles south-west of Calabar, on 5 June 1969, was an International Red Cross plane, with a mixed crew of Swedish, American, and Norwegian citizens [71], [3], [23]. The aircraft was reportedly mistaken for a rebel plane. However, it was a Swedish Red Cross plane from Stockholm, one of the two missing jets which belonged to the Nord Church Aid Organisation. *Daily Times* also reported that the federal military government intercepted all Red Cross planes carrying relief materials to the Biafran enclaves [71]. Philip Efiog adds that "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" [23]. These acts caused some catastrophic fate to the people of goodwill who were killed, injured, or harassed during their service to humanity. It further heightened the plight of the starved non-combatants of Biafra.

Furthermore, the federal military government indicted Dr. August Lindt, the then-West African coordinator of the International Red Cross, for disobeying the order of the Nigerian Government. He was declared *persona non grata* and detained for a night in Lagos before being repatriated to Geneva [72], [66, p.309]. While Lindt was invited for a talk in Geneva, there was little hope of any foreign support for the people of Biafra. On this basis, through Caritas International, the Catholic Church continued to defy the command of the federal military government to supply food and relief materials to the war-affected regions of Biafra. The defiance further created more tensions between the Church and the Nigerian government. To ease the tension between the federal government and the Catholic Church, the Pope offered to send Catholic relief flights into the Biafran enclaves directly from Rome to ensure that no

arms were aboard instead of neglecting the children in the face of starvation. The Pope's offer was turned down by the Nigerian Commissioner for External Affairs, Dr. Okoi Arikpo [73], [89]. The rejection ended any possibility of the Vatican arriving at a consensus with the Nigerian government on relief flights. Even though the Caritas flights were done at night and were considered a breach of Nigerian territorial order, it was necessary to save innocent civilians from dying in the enclaves. Thus, in a situation where daylight flights were not obtainable due to the federal government's attacks on them, the Church as a voluntary agency, not as a sovereign State of the Vatican, was the only hope that sustained Biafra at some point.

There was also a meeting point between Caritas and other international relief organisations such as the Red Cross and the World Council of Churches. According to the 1969 annual report of the International Committee of Red Cross (ICRC), Caritas Internationalis and the World Council of Churches worked together with the ICRC to establish about four hundred refugee centres which fulfilled the minimum requirements necessary throughout Biafra for some eight hundred thousand children out of the region's 2.5 million. The report noted that it was challenging to determine the exact number of children in need of relief assistance in the Biafran enclaves [74]. Such a challenge was due to the severity of the war in some parts of the Biafran enclaves, making it difficult for statisticians and humanitarian workers to access. Hence, many people, without access to needed relief materials, died in the wood while some fell by the roadside. The various humanitarian organizations managed about one million people in different refugee camps in the region. The population of those in need of humanitarian aid in the rural areas were exponentially enlarged due to urban-rural migration conditioned by regular air raids in urban centres. These were matters of great concern to the international community of humanitarian workers [75].

To alleviate the relief crisis, Caritas International made more effort to intensify more relief materials in the region. Subsequently, in the first fortnight in December 1969, about 96 flights from different international relief organisations, including Caritas International, took palliatives to the tune of about 914 tons to Biafra. Meanwhile, from the inception of the relief operations, the ICRC alone had accounted for 558 flights transporting about 5300 tons of relief materials to war victims. As of 20 December 1969, they increased their supplies to 643 flights and 6,083 tons of food, clothing, and pharmaceuticals. Though more than 850,000 people, primarily women and children, benefitted from the ICRC relief materials, the Biafran situation would have been more precarious without the constant presence of Caritas and other Catholic relief agencies that complemented ICRC. Still, many areas were not touched. Hence, the Biafran humanitarian need was far from being satisfied despite the services of Caritas, ICRC, and other internationally recognised groups [75, p.3].

Most relief operations carried out by the Church relief agencies such as Caritas were primarily financed by the US and run with their surplus C-9s. To a more considerable extent, they held the line against mass starvation in the enclave. The protein deficiency, which caused retardation and death for most under-

ten children, was purportedly rising hastily [75, p.3], [76]. With the mounting famine in the Biafran enclave, the US government, not wishing to worsen relations with the Nigerian government, was still left with the option of relying entirely on the scary night flights by Caritas and other Church voluntary agencies. Their reliance was despite the US-donated planes, and the American civilian crews used by such agencies were bound to be shot down by the federal MiGs at any point [77]. They still believed that a daylight flight arrangement was the only natural remedy to the considerable risks of 'illegal' night flights into the Biafran enclaves. Hence, in his address to the UN, the US Secretary of State openly expressed his strong personal interest and sympathy with a country he had visited and enjoyed. He indicated that the US had done what it could for Nigeria and was distressed that the problem had not yet been solved [78].

Amid all these anomalies, one relief organisation still stood firm with a sense of duty and moral obligation to defend humanitarian services to the Biafran enclaves, that is, *Caritas Internationalis*. Hence, the ICRC had no alternative but to channel their relief to Biafra through Caritas. Furthermore, some US congressional personalities stood up to the challenge by organising a high-powered new organisation called 'Americans for Biafran Relief.' Senators Kennedy, Pearson, and Goodell were the leaders of the new movement. Other members include Congressmen Lukins, Fraser, Lowenstein, and other prominent US citizens, including Katherine Menninger, Bishop Swanstrom of Catholic Relief, and Fulton Lewis III. Membership was also drawn from the Young Republican and Young Democrat Federations, as well as religious relief bodies across the US [79].

With the economic blockade, the Biafrans fought against bullets and cannonballs and starvation as weapons of war. Hence, a report from the Southeastern State government indicated that the most incredible fight confronting Ojukwu as he refused to surrender and give up his secession was the enormous problem of hunger, malnutrition, death, and depletion of the Igbo population [80]. The condition of life in Biafra was unbearable for the populace, especially for children and nursing mothers. Following the shortage of food in Biafra in the first half of 1968 was kwashiorkor, a protein deficiency disease, which started claiming its toll in the last trimester of 1968. It is estimated to have claimed at least 1,000 lives daily between December 1968 to December 1969. Though the disease was not limited to children, most of its victims were children between the ages of one and ten. The amount of food flown into Biafra was nowhere near enough to cope with the situation [81]. The effects on the children were so glaring that parents in the West had to warn their children to eat well so as not to suffer from kwashiorkor [82].

The food materials airlifted to Uli by Caritas and other humanitarian organisations were collected by Biafran trucks nightly to the camps and over-populated villages. The condition was so terrible that villagers and refugees alike ate rats, mice, lizards, snails, caterpillars, and grasshoppers. It was famine at its peak. In most camps, the humanitarian workers reduced the people's meals to one portion a day. Most of them received less

than 1200 calories a day. The protein famine was at its peak between 1968 and 1969. A more precarious carbohydrate famine instead worsened it. The shortage of carbohydrates, protein and salt increased the mortality rate and created a spirit of desperateness among relief workers who dared to fly into the Biafran enclaves despite all odds [57]. On this note, there was a high demand for well-balanced diets in Biafra, especially for children. Hence, more protein food materials were imported by Caritas into the region. Popular among such imported foodstuffs were salted-stock fish and milked-corn meals popularly known all over Biafra as *Garri-Gabon*, mostly imported from the coasts of Gabon [84]-[86]. Despite the effort made for the importation, the supplies of food were not enough for the Biafran children.

The night operations to Biafra were not an easy task. Many people, including two English pilots, lost their lives in the process. However, it was the belief of the Caritas “that some people must die to help 9 million people to live, and we believe that for certain people to live, we must be ready to die” [36]. Among those who died for the Biafrans to live was an English pilot, Captain McCombie, who worked for Caritas International. He believed that despite the hazardous condition of night flights to Biafra, he was ready to give his life for the masses in Biafra to survive. As narrated by Anthony Byrne in the documentary, “Night Flights to Uli”, when McCombie and his co-pilot lost their lives in one of their scary night flights to Biafra, it was an uphill task to break the tidings of such doom to their wives and children. However, their families took it with solemn pride that the bereaved lost their lives, paying the ultimate price to ride the Biafran populace of hunger and death caused by man’s inhumanity to man, an evil motivated by ethnicity, greed, and lust for wealth and power [36].

### III. CONCLUSION

Chimamanda Adichie expresses the agony of starvation which informed the assiduous humanitarian intervention of the Catholic Church in the conflict in the following words: “Starvation was a Nigerian weapon of war. Starvation broke Biafra and brought Biafra fame and Biafra lasted as long as it did. Starvation made the people of the world take notice and sparked protests and demonstrations in London and Moscow and Czechoslovakia. Starvation made Zambia and Tanzania and Ivory Coast and Gabon recognize Biafra, starvation brought Africa into Nixon’s American campaign and made parents all over the world tell their children to eat up. Starvation propelled aid organizations to sneak fly food into Biafra at night since both sides could not agree on routes. Starvation aided the careers of photographers. And starvation made the International Red Cross call Biafra its gravest emergency since the Second World War” [82].

It is starvation that prompted the Catholic missionaries and other relief workers to risk their lives and stand as the final beacon of hope for Biafra. To assuage the anguish of starvation, the Catholic missionaries led by Fr Anthony Byrne of Caritas International arranged night flights from Sao Tome Island to Uli airports in Biafra [30], [83]. In some cases, each plane used to make up to three shuttles every night. There were always people

on standby to offload lorries filled with relief materials into the aircraft for round trips to Biafra. The humanitarian workers did these in the quietness of the nights that went by without bombing or anti-aircraft attacks. It did not cease to operate at nights soaked with suspense and casualties either from mechanical accidents or anti-aircraft attacks from the federal troops.

While these exercises were considered service to humanity, it was equally spiced up with a spirit of adventure as some of the crew members with their families and friends still found time to relax over some cups of coffee and airport snacks. Such a relaxed moment with families and friends went a long way to give the pilots and crew members the courage to fly into thick darkness to take the bright light of hope to the Biafrans, who waited patiently for their arrival. The flight from Sao Tome took an hour or two to arrive at Uli. It was a sign to the Biafrans that they had not been forgotten by the rest of the world, not Catholics. Nonetheless, the humanitarian workers made the people understand that people had died so that Biafrans may live. While just and lasting peace, the lasting solution to the Biafran problem was still bleak, the night flight to Uli was the beacon of light and hope in Biafra, described then as “one of the darkest places of the world” [36]. Such darkness could only be illuminated by the assiduous religious humanitarian strides of the Catholic Church who saw their role in the Biafran humanitarian intervention as a duty motivated by the Christian faith. This goes a long way to confirm the words of Michael Bennett that “humanitarianism is a matter of faith” [87], [88].

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