

In Defense of Vital Interests: United Nations and Anglo-American Diplomacy in the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970

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Abstract: This article examines the Anglo-American attitude towards the clamour for the debate of the Nigerian Civil War at the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly. To achieve this objective, the study adopts a historical narrative approach and bases its analysis on primary sources, namely, archival materials obtained from the British National Archives Kew London. The author argued that mounting pressure from the international public opinion prompted the campaign to debate the Nigerian conflict at the UN. The strong opposition from Nigeria, United Kingdom, and some Member-States of the Organization of African Unity inhibited a UN diplomatic action in the war with the perception that Western-inspired UN involvement would be viewed by African countries as neo-colonialism which posed a serious problem to the OAU peace efforts. The Anglo-American position on the matter was that the war was an internal affair under the control of the OAU. Hence, a UN initiative implied receipt of the global disposition of the conflict that strengthens the Biafran cause and weakens settlement on the basis of Nigerian unity. The urge for an official debate of the civil war proved futile because of the great power's diplomatic manoeuvrings within the Security Council and General Assembly premised on the calculation that there existed a tendency of discussions over-flowing on to the political aspects of the dispute, thus, endanger Anglo-American interests in Nigeria. The UN exhibited strong apathy to the Nigerian-Biafran situation having adopted the approach of soft condemnations and passionate speeches to the conflict rather than inestimable patience to sought formulas useful for the resolution of the war.

Keywords: United Nations, Anglo-American, Diplomacy, Nigerian Civil War

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Introduction

The 1960s was the period of decolonization that marked a watershed in the politics, leadership and development of Africa. However, a few years after gaining independence, African countries were besieged with internal leadership crises caused by party politics, struggle for power and resource control, ethnic and tribal scourge.¹

In the case of Nigeria, there emerged powerful secessionist movement in the Eastern Region that canvassed for a total separation from the country and eventually declared the

1 Meredith Martin, *The State of Africa: A History of Fifty Years of Independence* (Great Britain: The Free Press, 2005), 13; George, Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism?: The Coming Struggle for Africa* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1956); Hatch John, *A History of Postwar Africa* (London: Deutsch, 1965); Ali A. Mazrui & Wondji C, *General History of Africa*. Volume VIII (California United States: UNESCO & University of Cambridge Press, 1993).

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Republic of Biafra on 30 May 1967.²

On 6 July 1967 there was an outbreak of civil war between the Federal Military Government of Nigeria, led by Major-General Yakubu Gowon and the Republic of Biafra under the leadership of Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu.³

One significant incident that occurred during the conflict was the campaign for the United Nations' (UN) diplomatic and political intervention in the form of an official debate of the civil war at the Security Council and General Assembly. This epoch-making diplomatic event designated the fighting as a vital component of the international politics of the twentieth century.⁴

The essence of this study is to discuss the clamour for the official raising of the Nigerian Civil War at the UN Security Council and General Assembly. However, it implements a specific focus on Anglo-American attitude towards the UN diplomatic initiative in the civil war. Despite all that has been written on the Nigerian Civil War, not much is known about the Anglo-American reactions towards the need for a UN debate of the Nigerian conflict and that makes the subject matter worth interrogating.

The study adopted a historical narrative approach and based its analysis on primary sources namely archival materials employed from the British National Archives Kew London. Similarly, other secondary sources related to the subject matter were obtained from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) in Enugu State, Nigeria. This helped to ensure an acceptable level of accuracy of facts and an in-depth analysis of the issues discussed. The significance of this study lies in how the perception that the Nigerian Civil War was an internal affair thwarted the diplomatic efforts of debating the conflict at the UN Security Council and General Assembly.

The author argued that mounting pressure from the international public opinion prompted the campaign to debate the Nigerian conflict at the UN. Anglo-American position on the matter was that the war was an internal affair under the control of the Organization of African Unity (OAU). Hence, a UN initiative implied receipt of the global disposition of the conflict that strengthens the Biafran cause and weakens settlement based on

2 File No. JM 1/19/6C/1049/West and General African Dept. / Title: Commonwealth Africa: Nigeria, Political Affairs, Secession of Eastern Region, 10 March 1967-20 November 1968, Foreign and Commonwealth Office papers, 38/265, the National Archives, Kew London.

3 Brian McNeil, "The Nigerian Civil War in History and Historiography" in *Africa, Empire and Globalization: Essays in Honour of A.G. Hopkins*, edited by Toyin Falola and Emily Brownell, 539-551 (Durham, North Carolina: North Carolina Academic Press, 2014); Warren G.B., "Petroleum and the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970". *The Fletcher Forum* 3 no.2, 66 (2000); Michael, Gould. 2013. *The Struggle for Modern Nigeria: The Biafran War, 1967-1970* (London: I. B. Tauris & Co); Nwankwo A Arthur, *Nigeria: The Challenge of Biafra* Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publisher, 1972). Okpaku J, *Nigeria: Dilemma of nationhood: an African analysis of the Biafra Crisis* (New York: Third Press, 1970). Stremalu J. John, *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977); Waugh, Auberon and Cronje Suzanne, *Biafra: The British Shame* (London: Michael Joseph Limited, 1969); Kirk-Green, A.H.M. 1971. *Crisis and Conflict in Nigeria: A Documentary Source Book, 1966-1969, Volume I* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971); Achebe Chinua, *There was a country: a personal history of Biafra* (London: Penguin Book, 2012).

4 Warren 2000, "Petroleum and the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970," 66.

Nigerian unity. The urge for an official debate of the civil war proved futile because of the diplomatic manoeuvrings within the Security Council and General Assembly premised on the calculation that there existed a tendency of discussions over-flowing on to the political aspects of the dispute. Britain and United States were reluctant to act on the UN issue because of the danger it posed to their economic and political interests in Nigeria, which they vowed to protect from the beginning of the war. They wielded too much control on the UN and took a firm stance against allowing the civil war issue to be officially debated, as a means of protecting vital interests that fortify their mutual diplomatic relations with Nigeria. The UN exhibited strong apathy to the Nigerian-Biafran situation having adopted the approach of soft condemnations and passionate speeches to the conflict rather than inestimable patience to sought formulas useful for peaceful resolution of the war.

United Nations and Diplomacy of the Nigerian Civil War

Since its commencement on 6 July 1967 there was a limited need for the United Nations intervention in the Nigerian Civil War. In short, it took the UN Secretary-General, U-Thant, a year before making his first statement on the civil war for he regarded the conflict as an internal affair of the Federal Military Government of Nigeria which had to be settled exclusively within the framework of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) that had already established a Consultative Committee led by the Ethiopian Emperor, Hailé Selassié, saddled with the responsibility of initiating peace process geared towards settling the fighting. At this time also, the Commonwealth Secretariat in London had got involved in facilitating peace mediation between Nigeria and Biafra.⁵

Meanwhile, the drive to have the civil war debated at the United Nations Security Council and General Assembly was first presented on 25 September 1967 when the Vice-Chairman of the National Liberation Council (NLC) and the Chairman of Ghanaian Delegate at the UN, Harley and the Gambian Foreign Minister and delegate to the UN, A. B. N’jie made references to the Nigerian crisis in their respective policy statements delivered before the 22nd Plenary Session of the United Nations General Assembly. The two African diplomats had called for international intervention in the conflict through the UN because the Federal Military Government of Nigeria insisted that neither the OAU Consultative Committee nor anyone else should “mediate” in the civil war.⁶ In his statement, Mr. Harley said:

5 Confidential: Minute on Nigeria and OAU from British High Commission in Lagos to Commonwealth Office, 13th August, 1967, File No. TX 2/4/Part A/ 6C/1066/ West and General African Dept./ Nigeria: Political Affairs, External-Multilateral, Nigerian Civil War and OAU, 25 July 1967-31 December 1968, FCO, 38/232, TNA.

6 Confidential: Minute on Conversation between the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs Michael Stewart and General Ankrah on the Nigerian Civil War and OAU Peace Mission to Lagos, from D.C. Tebbit E.G. Norris, 3 October 1967, FCO, 38/22, TNA. See, Armstrong, R.A, *The Issues at Stake: Nigeria 1967*(Ibadan: University Press, 1967). Azikiwe Nnamdi, *Peace Proposals for ending The Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970*(London: Colusco Ltd, 1969). Ezeani, E, *In Biafra Africa died: The diplomatic plot*. 2nd eds. (London: Veritas Lumen publishers, 2013).

I know that there were several urgent matters which are at present exercising our minds in Africa and which some of our well-wishers would like to see tackled and solved by the Organization of African Unity. Prominent among them is the situation in Nigeria which is indeed a source of anguish and grief to all of us. I should like to assure this Assembly that everything possible will be done by us in Africa to assist our brothers in Nigeria to end this most regrettable fratricidal war and to restore the country to peace and harmony.⁷

In the afternoon of the same day, the Gambian delegate, A. B. N'jie said in his speech to the General Assembly that the situation in Nigeria, threatened by secession and disintegration, needed to be mediated by the world body. According to him, "there were lessons in these; I am sure, for all of us. As regards Nigeria, although the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Federation must be respected, and the principle of non-interference in the internal affairs of other states recognized, my Government feels that the situation had reached a stage where the possibility of some form of international mediation should be explored."⁸

On 28 September 1967 the Nigerian Permanent Representative at the UN, Simeon Adebo, protested against the reference of the Nigerian-Biafran dispute by the Gambian and Ghanaian delegates at the General Assembly session. On behalf of the Nigerian Commissioner for External Affairs, Okoi Arikpo, Simeon Adebo, told the General Assembly that since the two countries in question were represented at the conference of African Heads of State and Government in Congo-Kinshasa, their introduction of the civil war into the general debate of the august Assembly came as a surprise to the Nigerian delegation.⁹ The Nigerian Representative submitted:

Raising the internal affairs of Nigeria in the UN was incompatible with respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Nigeria. The Nigerian delegation did not doubt about the bona fides of the two distinguished African leaders whose statements they had hereby protested. They were sure that they meant well for Nigeria. Their countries have stood firmly by the Federal Government of Nigeria and they knew that they would continue to do so. He, therefore, trusted that they would understand the purpose of the Nigerian government's friendly protest.¹⁰

The stern reaction of the Nigerian representative at the UN over Ghanaian and Gambian diplomatic action did not deter other nations across the globe particularly from North America and Europe from agitating on the need to raise the conflict at the UN especially in

7 Confidential: Record of Speeches by Ghanaian Representative at the UN General Assembly from D.C. Tebbit of Commonwealth Office to the British High Commissioner in Lagos, 10 October 1967, FCO, 38/232, TNA.

8 From D.C. Tebbit to British High Commission in Lagos, 10 October 1967, FCO, 38/232, TNA.

9 Press Release: Adebo's Protest on Reference to Nigeria at UN. Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information No. F.2205, 28 September 1967, FCO, 38/232, TNA.

10 Press Release: Adebo's Protest on Reference to Nigeria at UN. Lagos: Federal Ministry of Information No. F.2205, 28 September, 1967, FCO, 38/232, TNA.

the wake of the breakdown of peace talks conveyed by the OAU Consultative Committee, intensification of military confrontation by both sides of the conflict and upsurge of human rights violations.

According to Philipé Ben, “in these circumstances it was not surprising that indignation mounted among the representatives of many countries. These representatives pointed out that in this war which had already lasted for twenty-one months, the UN had not made the slightest efforts to facilitate a political solution which would put an end to the fighting and had not even contributed to humanitarian action”.¹¹ Thus, an official discussion of at least the humanitarian aspect of the war by the UN was considered necessary because of the tragic nature of the war.

On 17 September 1968 the Canadian Minister for External Affairs, Mitchell Sharp, issued a historic declaration in the House of Parliament that Canada should refer to the humanitarian aspect of the civil war to the UN. According to him, “if the Member-States of the OAU refused to take the initiative of resolving the civil war Canada would not hesitate to bring the conflict before the UN.”¹²

Consequently, an official statement was issued to all the Canadian Diplomatic Missions abroad by the External Affairs Ministry on 18 September 1968 notifying them about the intended diplomatic move by Ottawa. According to the bulletin released for the Canadian Diplomatic Missions, the Minister argued: “Canadian interest was humanitarian. It did not want to intervene in the political dispute between Nigeria and Biafra. Canada was under heavy pressure from the opposition parties to explore the best means to bring the full weight of world opinion to bear on Nigeria and Biafra. The Government considered how we can act most effectively...”¹³

The activities of pro-Biafran sympathizers in Canada prompted the decision of the External Affairs Minister to initiate the diplomatic action in the UN. After making his intention known the Minister said that “daily he was spending more time on the Biafran issue than any other subject, and spending even more as time goes by”.¹⁴

The emergence of strong public criticisms over the way the civil war issue was being handled in Western European countries forced governments to call for the UN debate of the conflict as the price of holding aloof from political involvement with one side or the other. Furthermore, the growing dependence of both sides of the conflict on some European nations such as Britain, the Soviet Union, France, and Portugal for arms supply

11 Philipé Ben. The War in Nigeria: Growing Criticism of Mr. Thant’s Inaction. *Le-Monde*. 2nd -3rd, 1969.

12 Confidential: Minute on Canadian Attitude to the Nigerian Civil War from P.D. McEntee to P.H. Moberly, 19 September 1968, File No. TX 2/1/6C/1066/Part B/Nigeria: Political Affairs, External, General and Multilateral, the Nigerian Civil War and the United Nations, 14 February 1967-31 December 1969, FCO, 38/230, TNA.

13 Bulletin for Canadian Diplomatic Mission. 1968. External Affairs Minister Said the Canada will raise the Nigerian-Biafra Question in the UN if the OAU Does Not. Ottawa: Canadian Press from Rogers to Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 18 September 1968, FCO, 38/230, TNA.

14 From Rogers to Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 18 September 1968, FCO, 38/230, TNA.

further ignited the call on the UN to look into the matter. They were persuaded that the activities of these great powers posed a serious threat to the security of the West African region thus decided to develop diplomatic contacts at the UN concerning the matter.

France supported a UN debate of the Nigerian conflict. On 18 September 1968 ahead of the UN General Assembly meeting in New York, an official of the British Embassy in Paris, A.H. Campbell, asked a French official, Lacharrière, whether the Biafran War would be raised as an item at the UN Security Council, Lacharrière gave the impression that the French were determined to consider favourably some UN diplomatic move of a humanitarian character in the war.¹⁵

Then, on 2 October 1968 in a foreign policy speech to the French National Assembly, delivered on the eve of his departure for the UN General Assembly meeting in New York the French Foreign Minister, Michael Debré, called on the UN action in the civil war. He argued that:

Whether it is a question of Czechoslovakia, of Vietnams, of the Middle East, or Biafra, we see the same lack of recognition of the necessary cooperation between states and peoples. In other words, the same lack of recognition of the rules in the absence of which there exists only tension, intolerance, confrontation and conflict. the essential point in the declaration which I hope shortly to make in the name of the French government at the UN would be the necessity to respect these rules and I shall remind the United Nations that there is no more serious threat to peace than the maintenance of the state of affairs in which violence pays... There should be the cessation of arms supplies and worldwide recognition of the right of the Biafrans to self-determination.¹⁶

The campaign for UN intervention in the civil war received an unprecedented boost in the United States Congress following the famous speech of Senator Edward Kennedy on the floor of the house on 23 September 1968 where he called for strong international action to meet the humanitarian needs in the conflict.¹⁷ He specifically recommended that the UN General Assembly should consider and pass a resolution recognizing the international humanitarian obligations in the Nigerian situation; Second, that the resolution, employing the mandatory power of the United Nations Charter, direct the Secretary-General to use

15 Confidential: Minute on French Attitude towards the United Nations Affairs from A.H. Campbell of British Embassy in Paris to Miss A.M. Warburton C.V.C. of Foreign Office, 20 September 1968, File No. TX 8/27/Part A/ 6C/ 1068/ West and General African Dept/ Nigeria: Political Affairs, External, Bilateral, French Policy towards Nigeria, 1 January 1967-31 December 1969, FCO, 38/247, TNA.

16 Confidential: Text of Speech on the Nigerian Civil War and United Nations to the French National Assembly by French Foreign Minister Michael Debré, 2 October 1968, FCO, 38/244, TNA. See, Nnoli, O. "The Nigerian-Biafra Conflict: a Political Analysis" in Nigeria: Dilemma of Nationhood ed. (Okpaku, J. New York: The Third Press, 1972).

17 Confidential: The Speech of Senator Edward M. Kennedy on the Urgent Need for International Action to Meet Humanitarian Needs In the Nigerian Civil War 23 September 1968. United States Congressional and Senate Record/S11227, File No. TX 3/3/6C/1066/West African Dept./ Nigeria: Political Affairs, External, Bilateral, Relations with the United States, 1 January 1968-31 December 1969, FCO, 38/237, TNA.

his good office and all the resources available to him, to expedite the conclusion of a “mercy agreement” with the parties to the Nigerian conflict.¹⁸

Senator Kennedy’s speech received massive support from numerous US Congressmen. For instance, Senator Mansfield said that the United Nations takes the position that this war was an internal affair and therefore decided to stay out. It did not take that position concerning the Congo crisis and Rhodesian situation having declared them as matters of global concern. But the Biafrans were deliberately being starved and they died in their hundreds.¹⁹ According to Senator Mansfield:

How can the United Nations say that genocide perpetrated primarily through starvation and other means was not a matter of world concern? The United Nations and the US government should speak up more clearly about ways and means of solving this problem. The argument that the Nigerian situation was strictly an internal matter had to fall by the wayside. We know, for example, that the United Nations General Assembly had put on the agenda the whole question of apartheid in South Africa. Certainly, the problems which were suggested by the mass starvation in Biafra, and its genocidal consequences not only call for, but demanded more expeditious action than they have seen, and realized the significance of any further delay at this time; namely a mounting, but the needless loss of human life.²⁰

At the 354th meeting of the Ministerial Council of Western European Union (WEU) held on 21 and 22 October 1968 in Rome, the Italian Second Secretary Ministry of Foreign Affairs, (*Sous-secrétaire d’Etat aux affaires étrangères*) S.E. M. F. Malfatti said that the Italian government had been under intense pressure to act directly and raise the matter in the UN, having regarded the conflict as an internal affair and accepted the UN resolutions. Moreover, the question of arms supplies to both sides of the conflict was a fundamental issue that got the Italian government upset.²¹

Malfatti noted that “the Italian foreign policy towards the newly independent countries particularly in Africa had always been to suspend arms supplies in areas of tension. One wondered whether friendly countries which had continued to supply arms to Nigeria and Biafra, directly or indirectly, under special agreements might be able to bring the two

18 The Speech of Senator Edward M. Kennedy on the Urgent Need for International Action to Meet Humanitarian Needs In the Nigerian Civil War 23 September 1968. United States Congressional and Senate Record/S11227, FCO, 38/237, TNA.

19 The Speech of Senator Edward M. Kennedy on the Urgent Need for International Action to Meet Humanitarian Needs In the Nigerian Civil War 23 September 1968. United States Congressional and Senate Record/S11227, FCO, 38/237, TNA.

20 The Speech of Senator Edward M. Kennedy on the Urgent Need for International Action to Meet Humanitarian Needs In the Nigerian Civil War 23 September 1968. United States Congressional and Senate Record/S11227, FCO, 38/237, TNA.

21 Secret: Draft Minute of the 354th Meeting of the Council of Western European Union Held at the Ministerial Level on 21 and 22 October 1968 in Rome, No. CR (68)19 Part 1, 26 October 1968. Nigerian-Biafran Question, 56-67, File No. JWN 2/2/Part A/ 5A/368/West African Dept./ Nigeria: Political Affairs, External, Bilateral, WEU Attitude towards the Nigerian Civil War, 1 January 1968-31 December 1969., FCO, 65/240, TNA.

sides to the negotiating table if arms supplies were halted.”²²

Similarly, the Italian Chamber of Deputies on 28 January 1969 adopted a motion that called on the Italian government to take an initiative of urging the UN to have the Biafran issue inscribed as an official item on the agenda of the Security Council and General Assembly.²³

The prevalent public reaction in Italy just like in other Western European nations led to the decision of the Italian government to have the civil war referred to the UN. Most Italians saw the situation as a humanitarian problem and wished that their government could make meaningful contribution in the war through the UN.

During his speech at the hearings of the subcommittee on Refugees and Escapees of the Senate Judiciary Committee regarding the Nigerian Civil War Relief Problems, July 15 1969, Senator Charles E. Goodwell said that the UN and its Secretary-General bear responsibility in the Biafran conflict. Despite the 1968 UN Study Reports that two million Biafrans perished by hunger and starvation, the UN had done nothing of real significance regarding the famine conditions in Biafra. The Secretary-General, U-Thant had dismissed as an internal problem a conflict that had been encouraged, financed and supported by three of the major world powers, Britain, the Soviet Union, and France. While recommending that the United States should make full use not only of its contacts with the two sides of the conflict but also its influence with other individual African States, the great powers, the UN and the OAU in resolving the conflict, Senator Charles argued that:

Is the United Nations so weak that it can do nothing to avert a famine in which millions may die? Is our influence in this great international body so small that we cannot move it to action? I cannot believe this is so and what of our policies? The United States, at least, has never involved itself in supplying armaments for the Nigerian Civil War. The fact that we, alone of the great powers, have not had direct arms involvements gives us a unique opportunity to expedite relief.²⁴

In the Netherlands, the House of Commons urged the United Kingdom government to take steps with the UN in conjunction with other friendly governments to seek ways of bringing the civil war to an end. Mr. Berkhouwer of Liberal Party asked the Netherland Foreign Minister whether it was justified to make an effort whether or not within the scope indicated above, to apply the UN Convention of 9 December 1948 regarding genocide to

22 Secret: Draft Minute of the 354th Meeting of the Council of Western European Union Held at the Ministerial Level on 21 and 22 October 1968 in Rome, No. CR (68)19 Part 1, 26 October 1968. Nigerian-Biafran Question, 56-67, FCO, 65/240, TNA.

23 Confidential: Additional Note on Proposed Italian Initiative in the United Nations Prepared for the Western European Union Ministerial Meeting Luxembourg 6 -7 February 1969, FCO, 65/240, TNA.

24 Speech by Senator Charles E. Goodwell For the Hearings of the Subcommittee on Refugees and Escapees of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Regarding Nigerian Civil War Relief Problems, July 15 1969, File No. JWN 3/304/1/Part C/ 368/Part C/ West African Dept/Nigeria: Political Affairs, Bilateral, External, United States Activities in the Nigerian Civil War, 1 January 1968-31 December 1969, FCO, 65/258, TNA.

appeal to competent UN bodies to put a stop to acts of genocide going on in Biafra.²⁵ According to the Netherlands Minister for Foreign Affairs J.M. A.H. Luns "public opinion in the Netherlands was deeply disturbed about the situation in Nigeria and especially its humanitarian aspects."²⁶

Ahead of a Foreign Affairs debate in the British House of Commons on 8 and 9 December 1969 a substantial number of British Parliamentarians signed an early day motion urging Her Majesty's Government to press through the UN Security Council for an immediate and total arms embargo on arms supply to Nigeria and Biafra.²⁷

Gabon and Ivory Coast being among the two major countries in Africa that recognized Biafra strongly clamoured for a UN initiative in the civil war. In their respective speeches delivered at the UN General Assembly session held in December 1969, the delegates of the two nations disagreed with the UN approach to the problems of decolonization and conflicts in Africa particularly the Nigerian-Biafran War. The UN had adopted in the conflict, wrong approaches of soft condemnations and passionate speeches, instead of patience to sought peaceful formulas acceptable to both sides of the conflict.²⁸

Both countries were highly critical of the UN general apathy to the Nigerian-Biafran situation. According to the Ivorian Foreign Minister and delegate to the UN, Arsene Usher, "to protest against this attitude which was unworthy of African humanism, the Ivory Coast had decided to abstain in any resolution dealing with these problems until an end was put to this shameful internecine war."²⁹

By calling for a new strategy to bring about change which would make it easier for other Member-States of the UN reach an understanding with them the Gabonese Foreign Minister and delegate to the UN, Ayune, said, "thus, until we mobilize our minds to put together this new strategy, Gabon would not participate in any vote on resolutions presented during the session of the General Assembly concerning these problems." Ivory Coast and Gabon had intended to use their votes as a protest against the refusal of the UN to deal with the Nigerian-Biafran problem.³⁰ The statement by the pro-Biafran African

25 Questions Asked by Mr. Berkhouwer of Liberal Party Concerning the Civil War in Nigeria Submitted on 14 July 1969 from the British Embassy in The Hague to the West African Department of Foreign Office, 13 August 196 File No. JWN 3/340/1/Part A/5A/368/ Nigeria: Netherlands Attitude towards the Nigerian Civil War, 1 January 1968-31 December 1969, FCO, 65/279, TNA.

26 Secret: Draft Minutes of the 361st Meeting of the Council of WEU at Ministerial Level on 6 and 7 February 1969 in Luxemburg, CR (69) 3, FCO, 65/241, TNA.

27 Confidential: Minute on Foreign Affairs debate in the British House of Commons from Foreign Office to Lagos, 8 and 9 December 1969, FCO, 38/229, TNA.

28 Confidential: Minute on Gabonese and Ivory Coast Speech at the UN General Assembly Session in December 1969 from A.S. Papadopoulos of the UN Department in the Foreign Office to John Wilson the Head of West African Department, 10 December 1969, File No. PRG 447/1/Information Research Dept./Nigeria: Information, British Information Research Department Work on Gabonese Attitude towards the Nigerian Civil War, 1 January 1968-31 December 1969, FCO, 95/617, TNA.

29 From A.S. Papadopoulos of the UN Department in the Foreign Office to John Wilson the Head of West African Department, 10 December 1969, FCO, 95/617, TNA.

30 From A.S. Papadopoulos of the UN Department in the Foreign Office to John Wilson the Head of West African Department, 10 December 1969, FCO, 95/617, TNA.

countries showed their readiness to flex diplomatic muscle by ensuring that the Nigerian-Biafran question was inscribed as an official item on the agenda of the UN Security Council and General Assembly.

Anglo-American Diplomacy and United Nations Initiative

The possibility of raising the Nigerian-Biafran question at the United Nations intensified following the report that the Biafrans were gaining greatly in terms of global public opinion and that much sympathy for the Biafran cause was expressed in Western Europe and Britain, particularly in the House of Parliament and in church circles.³¹

At a meeting with the Danish Ambassador, Munk, in February 1968, the British High Commissioner, Sir David Hunt, said that he was very uncertain about the idea of an appeal in the United Nations General Assembly over the civil war issue. Moreover, the Nigerians had tended to be more enraged about the matter than during the remarks on the need for international mediation in the conflict made at the UN General Assembly meeting by Ghanaian and Gambian delegates in 1967.³²

On 6 August 1968 a meeting at the British Foreign Office was organized to look at the implications of the Nigerian Civil War being taken to the UN. It was considered that if the OAU mediatory effort in the conflict broke down, the matter could be raised in the Security Council. This might be done by a European country or an African nation that recognized Biafra.³³

Evidence suggested that Zambia had thought of doing so, much sooner than later. However, items to be presented could either be the request for a meeting or draft resolution specifically calling for a ceasefire and the use of the good offices of the UN Secretary-General for diplomatic action, the cutting off of arms supplies, international relief measures and possible appointment of a UN Observer Force. A call for a referendum in the minority areas of Biafra might follow later.³⁴

The British officials stated the importance of Britain's unalloyed support for the Nigerian government who they perceived would be deeply offended if her dispute with Biafra had to be brought before the UN Security Council. While Britain did not officially recognize the independence of the Republic of Biafra, it regarded the civil war as an internal affair and opposed its official inscription on the agenda of the UN Security Council and General Assembly. However, if there was a simple call for a ceasefire and peaceful settlement at the UN which also included humanitarian issues it would be difficult for Britain to resist support of such diplomatic move. Hence, the appropriate thing to do in such a scenario

31 Confidential: Note of Record between the British High Commissioner in Lagos Sir David Hunt and Danish Ambassador Munk from the British High Commission to Foreign Office, 23 February 1968, FCO, 38/229, TNA.

32 From the British High Commission to Foreign Office, 23 February 1968, FCO, 38/229, TNA.

33 Confidential: Note of a Meeting of British Officials at the Foreign Office on the Inscription and Discussion of the Nigerian Civil War at the UN, 6 August 1969, FCO, 38/229, TNA.

34 From Foreign Office to Lagos, FCO, 38/229, TNA.

was to advise the Nigerian government to accept the discussion of the conflict at the UN as a way of reducing public criticisms against them.³⁵

Meanwhile, there were public debates in the United States on why the Nigerian conflict could not be submitted to the UN and why the US should not support such a diplomatic initiative. It was discovered that, the US officials discussed the problem with the UN Secretary-General who exhorted parties to the conflict to negotiate their differences. According to the US official view:

Although, the referral of the Nigerian problem to the UN was superficially attractive, there exist very serious problems in attempting to engage the UN in the war. More direct involvement required a Security Council or General Assembly action. As noted by US Under-Secretary Richardson before Edward Kennedy Sub-Committee on 15th July 1969 the UN had been unable to take up this problem because strong African opposition had precluded its introduction before the Security Council or General Assembly.³⁶

Earlier consultations with the small number of key UN member-states convinced the US that it would be extremely difficult if not impossible to obtain nine votes necessary to inscribe the Nigerian item on the Security Council agenda. The diplomatic resistance of the Federal Government of Nigeria, United Kingdom, and the OAU had inhibited most other UN members from urging UN diplomatic action in the war. Many felt that Western-inspired UN involvement would be viewed by African countries as neo-colonialism.³⁷

A UN debate of the issue had the potential to be uncooperative and divisive; it could aggravate tensions and hinder progress towards a peaceful reconciliation of the conflict. A further problem was the Soviet Union's attempt to exploit the situation by posing as Nigeria's champion and supporter of preponderant African opinion against "neocolonialists" including Portugal and South Africa.³⁸

However, the US through its Mission at the UN broached the idea of allowing only the humanitarian aspects of the war to be inscribed as an official item on the agenda of the UN Security Council and General Assembly. The idea was to send a letter to the Secretary-General asking that should in case no agreement on Biafra relief was reached in Addis Ababa the US would implement the diplomatic initiative at the UN without waiting for the outcome of further discussion at the OAU meeting in Algiers. The move towards the

35 Confidential: Note of a Meeting of British Officials at the Foreign Office on the Inscription and Discussion of the Nigerian Civil War at the UN, 6 August 1969, FCO, 38/229, TNA.

36 Confidential: US Telegram on UN and the Nigerian Problem from the American Embassy in Lagos to British High Commission in Lagos and all American Diplomatic Posts in Africa and Europe/DE: RUENC/1334582210703/ZNY/CCCC/ZZH/POL1/11482/9 August 1969, FCO, 65/244, TNA.

37 Confidential: US Telegram on UN and the Nigerian Problem from the American Embassy in Lagos to British High Commission in Lagos and all American Diplomatic Posts in Africa and Europe/DE: RUENC/1334582210703/ZNY/CCCC/ZZH/POL1/11482/9 August 1969, FCO, 65/244, TNA.

38 Confidential: US Telegram on UN and the Nigerian Problem from the American Embassy in Lagos to British High Commission in Lagos and all American Diplomatic Posts in Africa and Europe/DE: RUENC/1334582210703/ZNY/CCCC/ZZH/POL1/11482/9 August 1969, FCO, 65/244, TNA.

inscription of a new item on the UN agenda by the US administration was only intended to counteract its critics who complained about the US slow response to the war.³⁹

In a message to the British Foreign Office on 8 September 1968 the UK Mission in New York warned that if the Biafran issue was raised at all on the platform of the UN it might be difficult or impossible to exclude political issues altogether. It suggested the need for Britain to concentrate only on the humanitarian aspect of the conflict and favour reference to the General Assembly rather than the Security Council. The US with a good deal of support from Europeans particularly the Scandinavians and Austria had made some form of diplomatic moves to take an initiative of the kind.⁴⁰

The British Ambassador to the US, Sir Patrick Dean, reminded the Foreign Office that although the US States Department informed him that the decision of the US Mission in New York was not based on specific instructions from Washington, it only reflected the concern of the State Department. One of the questions frequently asked by the critics of the US administration was “why is the US government not doing anything about the civil war at the UN?” The State Department thought that a debate in the General Assembly, with attendant publicity, might help to educate the US public about the issues involved in the civil war and thereby make them more resistant to Biafra’s propaganda.⁴¹

The official response of the British Foreign Office was that the General Assembly could hardly be dissuaded from discussing the political component of the conflict once it began talking about the problem of relief. It doubted whether a UN debate on relief would lead to more effective action than the one being undertaken under the aegis of the International Committee of Red Cross with the attendant support of the UN agencies as arranged by U-Thant.⁴²

Western-backed UN initiative at a time when the Africans were actively discussing the Nigerian problem was an affront to the OAU peace efforts. Thus, it was a mistake to take a separate initiative before it was clear what more the Africans could achieve themselves. If the dangers of inscription were to be accepted, London should at least have a clear idea of what Americans wanted and expected to achieve either in the General Assembly or the Security Council.⁴³ According to the British Foreign Office:

There exist common ground between Britain and the US that the internationalization of the Nigerian Civil War could only work out to the Biafrans’ advantage and thereby defer a settlement based on Nigerian unity which they had always supported. Indeed,

39 Confidential: Minute on the Conversation between the UK Representative at the UN Lord Caradon and US Representative at the UN George Ball and Danish Representative at the UN Borch from UK Mission in New York to Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 8 September 1968, FCO, 38/229, TNA.

40 From UK Mission in New York to Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 8 September 1968, FCO, 38.229, TNA.

41 From UK Mission in New York to Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 8 September 1968, FCO, 38/229, TNA.

42 From Foreign Office to UK Mission in New York, 10 September 1968, FCO, 38/229, TNA.

43 From Foreign Office to UK Mission in New York, 10 September 1968, FCO, 38/229, TNA.

British policy in Nigeria would be put under severe strain by public discussion of the political issues of the war at the UN. The only beneficiary would be the Soviet Union for they have no public opinion to worry about in their support to Nigerian territorial integrity whilst Western powers had incurred strong Nigerian resentment for interfering in the internal affairs of the country. Based on the above reasons, the British government earnestly hoped that the US would not pursue the proposed diplomatic action.⁴⁴

British diplomats believed that a UN action in the civil war were very remote. Reference to the General Assembly could be counter-productive unless it was handled very carefully. Both as to timing and a substance they would be seriously perturbed if Britain and Americans got out of step over an initiative. Even if the action in the UN could be limited to relief measures, they were not clear what objective would be achieved⁴⁵. Despite appeals and protests addressed to the world body, it jettisoned the political component of the civil war and limited its role strictly on humanitarianism.⁴⁶

Giving the great powers' influence on its affairs during the 1960s, the UN was powerless to take appropriate diplomatic action in the fighting. Hence, it chose to maintain the status quo to the dictate of the external actors that had huge political and economic interests in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Mounting pressure from the international public opinion prompted the campaign to debate the Nigerian-Biafran conflict at the UN. The strong opposition of Nigeria, United Kingdom and some African nations inhibited a UN diplomatic action in the war with the perception that Western-inspired UN involvement would be viewed by African countries as neo-colonialism which posed a serious problem to the OAU peace efforts. The Anglo-American position on the matter was that the war was an internal affair under the control of the OAU. The OAU through its Consultative Committee was already actively engaged in seeking a solution to the civil war. Hence, a UN initiative implied receipt of the global disposition of the conflict that strengthens the Biafran cause and weakens settlement on the basis of Nigerian unity. It was the Anglo-American desire that the settlement of the dispute should be left in the hands of African hands, but to make this argument more convincing it was necessary to demonstrate that the OAU was actively engaged in peace negotiations.

The urge for an official debate of the civil war proved futile because of the diplomatic manoeuvrings within the Security Council and General Assembly premised on the calculation that there existed tendency of discussions over-flowing on to the political aspects of the dispute, thus, endanger Anglo-American interests. Majority of the Members

44 From Foreign Office to UK Mission in New York, 10 September 1968, FCO, 38/229, TNA.

45 From Foreign Office to UK Mission in New York, 10 September 1968, FCO, 38/229, TNA.

46 Note for the Secretary-General from René de Branché, RideB/ksn/CR. 13/11/64, 3rd June, 1969, United Nations Archives New York.

of the Security Council and the General Assembly were against raising the matter unless the Nigerian government itself agreed-which was seen as most unlikely. An attempt to force the issue on the UN had tended to create confrontational attitudes and caused further divisions without producing tangible results. The UN exhibited strong apathy to the Nigerian-Biafran situation having adopted the approach of soft condemnations and passionate speeches to the conflict rather than inestimable patience to sought formulas useful for effective resolution of the war. The complexity of the conflict led to the incapacitation of the UN just like the OAU to act politically and diplomatically in the war. The diplomatic siege laid against the call for official UN debate of the fighting was equally part of the strategy towards exasperating the efforts of many Western countries that indicated interests to recognize the Republic of Biafra. Some of these nations wanted to take the high ground over the discussion of the war to voice their official support and recognition for Biafra. But that never happened because of Anglo-American influence within the UN Security Council and General Assembly. They wielded too much control on the UN and took a firm stance against allowing the civil war issue to be officially discussed, as a means of protecting their economic and political interests in Nigeria.

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