

## THE UNITED NATIONS OBSERVER TEAM AND PRISONERS OF WAR DURING THE NIGERIAN CIVIL WAR, 1967-1970

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**Abstract:** This study interrogated the role of the United Nations Observer Team in ascertaining the conditions and management of prisoners of war during the Nigerian Civil War. While the study adopted historical methodology for data analysis, it utilized primary sources such as archival materials and newspapers obtained from the British National Archives in Kew London and secondary sources namely books and journal articles for data collection. The study indicated that, the conditions of the POWs during the civil war were frightening. Biafran and Nigerian military captured many POWs during military operations on both sides, unfortunately, due to lack of adequate resources they were not treated in accordance with the Geneva Convention on human rights despite the ICRC's urgent appeal to the belligerents for them to conform strictly to the provisions of the international humanitarian law and in particular to article 3 of the Geneva Conventions. Discussions were held with the appropriate authorities concerning the Geneva Conventions Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War; Article 3 established a minimum standard in respect of conflicts not of an international character. Most Biafra POWs was well treated to a certain extent and exchanged during the war but the federal troops executed most Biafran POWs because of hatred and indoctrination from foreign mercenaries. POWs were subjected to torture and abuse; lacked opportunities to exercise their fundamental human rights. Many prisoners were obliged to sleep on the bare floor. Inadequate food, medical and sanitary arrangements had contributed to poor health conditions and the outbreak of diseases like chickenpox and smallpox diseases among the prisoners of which their treatment would not have been possible without international humanitarian organizations. Concern about the fate of the war prisoners by the international community prompted the United Nations to constitute an observer team charged with the responsibility of ascertaining the extent to which the prisoners of war had been treated in the conflict. Intense criticisms meted against the UN non-intervention in the war led to the world body assembling the observer team that visited the warzone to report on the conditions of the prisoners of war, displaced persons and refugees. The report

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about genocide being committed in the war rekindled the UN action of ascertaining the welfare of prisoners in Nigeria and Biafra. The UN report on the prisoners of war showed that the two sides did not show regards for the prisoners of war. However, in some camps they visited the POWs were well treated but still enough was not done as stipulated in Geneva Conventions on human rights. The initiative was part of the UN move of countering international public opinion that it was not doing enough to salvage the plights of civilians and prisoners of war in the conflict. The study concludes that, the consciousness of providing basic needs for the survival of the POWs was on the front burner of humanitarian operations of the conflict. It was not possible to abandon the POWs to suffer especially when many of them were infected with diseases and emotional trauma.

**Keywords:** Civil War; United Nations; Observer; Team; Prisoners of War; Nigeria

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### Introduction

After Nigeria gained her independence from the British colonialism on 1 October 1960, <sup>1</sup> a civil war broke out between the Federal Military Government of Nigeria, led by Major-General Yakubu Gowon and the Eastern region that was later declared the Republic of Biafra by Military Governor of the Region, Lieutenant-Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, on 6 July 1967.<sup>2</sup> The conflict recorded cases of captivities. Captors in that war were majorly referred to as “prisoners of war”.<sup>3</sup> During the military campaign

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<sup>1</sup> Nwankwo Arthur Agwuncha and Ifejika Samule Udochukwu, *The Making of a Nation: Biafra* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1969), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Warren, G.B. “Petroleum and the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970,” *The Fletcher Forum*. 3, No.2, (2000): 66. See also, Stremlau, J. John. *The International Politics of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970*. (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977). Chinua Achebe. *There was a Country Personal History of Biafra* (England: Allen & Lane Penguin Books, 2012). Akinbi Joseph Olukayode, 2012. Supra-National Organisations and Conflict Resolution during the Nigerian Civil War: A Historical Review. *An International Journal of Arts and Humanities* 1(4) 306.

<sup>3</sup> The National Archives, Kew London. Confidential: Minute on Relief Problem in Midwest addressed by the British High Commissioner in Lagos Sir David Hunt to Commonwealth Office Telegram No. 36, 21st October, 1967, Foreign and Commonwealth Office Papers, 38/297, File No. TX 11/5/6C/1066/Part A/West and General African Dept./ Nigeria, Disaster, Relief Work and Operations, 26<sup>th</sup> August, 1967-1<sup>st</sup> May, 1968. See also, Smith, Karen E. (2014) The UK and ‘genocide’ in Biafra. *Journal of Genocide Research*, 16 (2-3), 247-262. DOI: [10.1080/14623528.2014.936703](https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2014.936703). Lasse Heerten and Dirk Moses A. (2014) The Nigeria-Biafra War: postcolonial conflict and the question of genocide, *Journal of Genocide Research*, 16(2-3), 169-203, DOI: [10.1080/14623528.2014.936700](https://doi.org/10.1080/14623528.2014.936700) 172.

between Nigeria and Biafra Armed Forces in the nearby Biafra and Nigerian villages many enemy stragglers were taken as prisoners by the soldiers of both sides.<sup>4</sup>

In July 1967, at Enugu Federal soldiers captured about 800 people. Village by village women and children were caught in cross fire, thus, were captured and taken away.<sup>5</sup> As Federal troops spread deeper into the secessionist territory the problem of prisoners-of-war and their welfare worsened. A camp for Biafra prisoners was established at Makurdi close to the border between Nigeria and Biafra.<sup>6</sup> The invasion of the Midwestern region on 9 August 1967 saw displaced people taken as prisoners of war. When Benin was captured, non-indigenes went on rampage, looting and wrecking serious havoc in the city which affected businesses. However, many civilians particularly of Igbo origin were captured and handed over to the Nigerian soldiers who competed with each other for the fun of shooting them. Some of the Biafran soldiers while trying to escape were captured and taken away by the Federal troops.<sup>7</sup>

Biafra prisoners and civilians who waited at the federal camp of Makurdi, made an outdoor movie theatre on November 1 1967 in Enugu after fighting between Nigerian federal army troops and the Biafra soldiers.<sup>8</sup> During his visit to Biafra in May 1968 a renowned British journalist Frederick Forsyth recalled that he spoke to good numbers of Nigerian prisoners of war captured by Biafra army. All admitted that they had not volunteered but had been conscripted by hard-line recruiting sergeants on street corners and in market places to fight in the civil war. After a week's training they were sent to the war

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Emeigrigor, Fall of Benin. *African Monthly Review*. 1967, 17. David Tattersall. Biafra Captive Sally is Home. *Daily Mirror*. 18 June 19.

<sup>4</sup>Alexandra A. Madiebo, *The Nigerian Revolution and Biafra War* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Co, 1980) , 128.

<sup>5</sup> Norman Kirkham, "Troops Mop Up Enugu Snipers: Bodies Litter Streets". *Daily Telegraph*, 11 October, 1967, 1. See also, "Civilians as Military Targets". *Biafra Newsletter*, Friday 15 March 1968. „From Biafra Women: We are learning by blood" *The Leopard*, Friday April 5 1968.

<sup>6</sup> "Nigeria: Biafran Prisoners Receive Medical Attention At Makurdi Camp. 1967". *Reuters and Visnews* Archive 18/07/1967.<https://www.britishpathe.com/video/VLVAC188J9BRSUEQMS4H8CRJD79W2-Nigeria-Biafran-Prisoners-Receive-Medical-Attention-At-Makurdi/Query/Our+Eastern>. Federal Government of Nigeria. *United Nigeria*. No.4. 11<sup>th</sup> October, 1968. London: Nigerian House Press, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Lateef Olayinka, „Nigeria: Drums of Defeat". *Times*. 6 October, 1967, 1.

<sup>8</sup> Godspower Godwin, „We are all Casualties of War". *Punch*. 22 October 2017. <https://punchng.com/we-are-all-casualties-of-war/?amp..>

front with a rifle and a pouch of ammunition. These new soldiers loot, rape, kill and tortured people to death mostly in the camps.<sup>9</sup>

The renowned author of the book titled “the Tragedy of Victory”, Major-General Alabi-Isama revealed how they captured five Biafrans who were on a mission to poison water at Calabar purposely to kill the enemy<sup>10</sup> All over Biafra civilians moved from one place to another hiding or running from frequent air raids and in the process many of them were captured.

Apart from civilians and soldiers from both sides that were captured, foreigners also were victims of captivity during the Nigerian conflict. Sally Goatcher was a British nurse who worked for the Save the Children Fund in Biafra. She was held captive for sixteen days in war-ravaged territory. She was arrested after she took a wrong turning in her Red Cross Landing-Rover. Biafran soldiers stopped her at a road block. Sally was held for four days by the Biafran army and spent the rest of the time in prison. While she was with the army, she was accused of being a spy and was questioned daily. At one time, she broke down and cried. But, she said that she was never treated badly. She said: “they told me to put up my hands, which I did with some speed. I was never frightened. “I was never intimidated. They respected the fact that I was European and a woman and treated me very kindly indeed.” In the prison, she was looked after by the Biafran Police Women (BPW). She was later released and arrive London on 17<sup>th</sup> June, 1969 and reunited with her family. Sally’s mother on sighting her daughter, said: “we are just thrilled to have Sally home”.<sup>11</sup>

On November 2, 1969 at about 9.30 P.M a 25 year old Portuguese Air Force pilot on loan to Biafra, Gil Pinto De-Sousa, crashed-landed near Keffi, in Benue, Plateau State Nigeria. He was captured and held as prisoner in Lagos. Gil Pinto De-Sousa, until he received orders to fly planes on bombing raids at the Federal side had a Flying Sergeant in the Portuguese Air Force. On the day of the crash, Gil Pinto De-Sousa, had flew the Biafran plane, A T6 Texan Harvard aircraft, from Abidjan Airport to Uli-Ihiala Air Port in Biafra, when he ran into bad weather, lost his way, eventually ran out of fuel, crashed-landed and was promptly handed over to the Police authorities by vigilant villagers.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Frederick Forsyth, „Gutted Hamlets and Rotting Corpses: This is Genocide”. *The Sunday Times*. 12 May 1968, 9. Gould Michael 2013. See also, *The Struggle for Modern Nigeria: The Biafran War, 1967-1970*. (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 2013), 82.

<sup>10</sup> Alabi-Isama, Godwin, *The tragedy of victory: on-the-spot account of the Nigeria-Biafra War in the Atlantic theatre* (Ibadan: Spectrum Books Limited, 2013), 103.

<sup>11</sup> David Tattersall. Biafra Captive Sally is Home. *Daily Mirror*. 18 June 1969.

<sup>12</sup> The National Archives, Kew London. Confidential: Press Release Fed to the Selected Press Representatives by the Nigerian Government on the Capture of A Portuguese Pilot from Lagos to Foreign and Commonwealth Office Telegram No. 2361, 12<sup>th</sup> November, 1969.

The International Committee of Red Cross first appealed to both sides at the beginning of the war to respect the Geneva Conventions concerning the POWs and to establish POWs camps for flexible management of captives of the war. The ICRC was greatly concerned about the summary execution of prisoners of war and of the massacring of civilians. The ICRC had made an urgent appeal to the belligerents for them to conform strictly to the provisions of international humanitarian law and in particular to article 3 of the Geneva Conventions. Discussions were held with the appropriate authorities concerning the Geneva Conventions Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War; Article 3 established a minimum standard in respect of conflicts not of an international character. The basic question that was posed was whether prisoners of war could justifiably be held in ordinary prisons with common law offenders.<sup>13</sup>

This paper examines the role of the United Nations Observer Team in the management of prisoners of war during the Nigerian Civil War. While the study adopts narrative historical methodology in its analysis, it relied heavily on both primary and secondary sources for data collection. The primary data includes archival materials obtained from the British National Archives in Kew London. These are intelligence reports, annual records, administrative correspondence, personal papers, judicial records, newspaper reports. However, secondary data for this study includes books and journal articles.

In the Nigerian Civil War discourse, there is scanty literature on the subject of captivity or prisoners of war. Adequate efforts have not been devoted in looking at the experiences of prisoners of war and how it shaped the international politics of the civil war. Therefore, this study is significant not just in terms of filling the gap existing in the literature but exposing the experiences of people held as captors during the war, and prospectively integrate the issue within the global discourse of captivity in war and the role of transitional actors.

The study shows that, there were gloomy and better sides of conditions of prisoners of war during the civil war. The limited prison facilities resulted in extreme overcrowding of prisoners in their cells, the lack of necessary opportunities for exercise or other constructive activity, and availability of insufficient medical services. Prisoners lacked opportunities to exercise their rights and spent too little time in the open. The prisoners of war had only little clothing to wear and in many cases showed every need of replacement. The basic question posed was whether prisoners of war could justifiably be held in ordinary prisons with common law offenders. Some efforts were made to keep the prisoners of war apart but in the cramped conditions this could hardly be

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<sup>13</sup> The National Archives, Kew London. Appeal for the Geneva Conventions to be respected in Nigeria. Geneva: Press Release No. 860b, 23 1967 File No. TX 11/5/6C/1066/Part A/West and General African Dept./ Nigeria, Disaster, Relief Work and Operations, 26th August, 1967-1 May 1968.

effective. Biafran military captured many Nigerian POWs, unfortunately, due to lack of adequate resources they were not treated in accordance with Geneva Convention. What matters was the professionalism with which POW were treated. Most Biafra POWs was well treated and exchanged during the war but the federal troop executed most Biafran POWs because of hatred and indoctrination from foreign mercenaries.<sup>14</sup> The first section of the section of the study discusses how the United Nations became involved in matters concerning prisoners of war during the civil war and the second section interrogates the conditions of the prisoners of war in the conflict.

### **United Nations Observer Team and Prisoners of War**

The issue of prisoners of war was one of the major developments that attracted the attention of the international community during the Nigerian civil war. The invocation of the Geneva Conventions of 1949 and Genocide acts of 1968 further escalated the concerns of the global voluntary and multilateral organizations such as the International Committee of Red Cross and UN in the wake of capturing and killings of war prisoners, intense and indiscriminate attacks on civilian population most importantly unnecessary shooting down of aircrafts belonging to humanitarian organizations; the capture and killing of relief workers in the war.

The UN was prompted to respond because of human rights abuses of the prisoners. The fact that captive or prisoners of war were denied the right to freedom, security and protection, hence, exposed to live threatening situations that led to untimely deaths was a great indication of how human rights was threatened in the wake of massive captivity in the war. The question of prisoners of war was one of the reasons the UN broached the idea of assisting the civilians trapped in the conflict on humanitarian grounds. The UN inaugurated a fact-finding committee mandated to visit the warzones in order to ascertain the level of devastation that took place in the conflict and to study how the civil war had affected the living conditions of prisoners of wars.

In November 1968, the United Nations broached the idea of sending a Special Representatives to Lagos and other war areas with the view to make on the spot assessment of the situation which would enable to UN to act towards alleviating the civilian sufferings. At the Anglo-American diplomatic talks on UN matters held at the UN headquarters in New York the United Kingdom Mission Representative at the UN Lord Caradon told the US Delegate at the UN George Ball and other US officials that the situation in Nigeria and Biafra had become a UN question. And that the Secretary-General U-Thant was

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<sup>14</sup>The National Archives, Kew London. Note of Anglo-US Diplomatic Talks on United Nations Matters and Nigeria Held on 11 July 1968 File No. JM 2/46/6C1049/West and General African Dept./Title: Nigeria, Political Affairs and United Nations 26 February, 1968-20 November 1968.

greatly concerned at the situation from the humanitarian point of view and had appealed to all concerned for a constructive response to the question of humanitarianism. U-Thant thought that the UN could contribute a good deal in the conflict.<sup>15</sup>

Lord Caradon had asked whether a specific initiative might be needed to coordinate the activities of the UN agencies selected to work in the fighting. U-Thant noted that he could only intervene for purely humanitarian reasons and if both the Federal government and Ojukwu concurred in his proposals. Lord Caradon noted that in view of the extreme urgency of the situation he needed to ask U-Thant about the possibility of appointing a Special Representative to visit the area, if these conditions were met for he was informed that following several days of obstructionism on the part of the Federal government, permission was granted for airlift of relief operations and visit to the war areas, but it remained to be seen whether this was a development of real significance but in any event the urgent UN action in the conflict had become necessary. George Ball then said that he shared the anxiety Lord Caradon expressed over the situation, and that the US government could encourage the Secretary-General in any initiative he might take to coordinate the humanitarian policies which were in the interests of all.<sup>16</sup>

The UN Secretary-General realized that no political discussion at the UN would be profitable in the face of massive criticisms of reluctant to have the matter discussed at the UN Security Council and General Assembly. Thus, it was hoped that he should be able to send personal delegates to oversee humanitarian efforts and appoint observers that would undertake on-the-spot assessment of the situation in the warzone.

In 1968, the UN Secretary-General U-Thant, appointed Nils-Goran Gussing as the Representative of the Secretary-General to Nigeria on Humanitarian Activities. In his capacity as Observer Gussing visited the southern and western fronts of the war territory during the period 5 to 18 October 1968. He or his assistants travelled around the Port Harcourt-Calabar areas from 5 to 10 October 1968 and again from 15 to 18 October, 1968 as well as touring the Benin-Onitsha-Kwale area during the latter period. They used the same transport facilities as the country Observers and the Organization of African Unity Representatives. In the course of short visits it was, of course only possible to see a selection of persons and places, but they had the

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<sup>15</sup>The National Archives, Kew London. Note of Anglo-US Diplomatic Talks on United Nations Matters and Nigeria Held on 11 July 1968.

<sup>16</sup> United Nations Digital Archives, United Nations Press Service, 1968. Secretary-General Announcement of the Appointment of Nils-Goran Gussing as Representative for Nigeria. New York: Office of Public Information Press Release SG/A/76/RIO/597, 1 August, 1968. File No. S-0884-0014-05-00001.

opportunity to visit principal towns on fronts, divisional headquarters, and most sectors commands and prisoners of war camps.<sup>17</sup>

The United Nations was accused of not doing anything to rescue the civilians suffering at various levels during the civil war. In short, the international public opinion and human rights activist did not like the actions of the UN in the conflict. Thus, as a way of detaching itself from the global criticisms over her inaction in the war, the UN constituted a team of observers to visit the warzone and to look into the conditions of the prisoners of war, displaced people and refugees. Even though it had taken a decision that it was the responsibility of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) to resolve the conflict for it was an internal matter and African affairs. Sending the observer team to Biafra and Nigeria was to redeem itself from the total condemnation of being silence in the face of maltreatment and killing of prisoners of war and other related atrocities committed during the civil war. It was a calculated move of dodging from the international campaign of intervening in the civil war which was championed by France, United States of America and other Western European countries except Britain and Russia.

### **Conditions of Prisoners of War during the Civil War**

Prisoners were concentrated in one or two camps to the exclusion of any other detainees. However, in Biafra there were no camps or prisons that fulfilled the conditions of effective management of prisons. The authorities were obliged to convert schools into POW camps. The security problems involved could well be imagined. The weight restrictions imposed by airlift capacity made it difficult to distribute aid equally to both sides. The application of the Geneva Conventions in the case of civilian internees was subjected to the same problems as in Federal territory.<sup>18</sup> A Finnish Naval Officer, Commander Ruusuvaori, who was seconded to the Nigerian Red Cross Society for three months and had visited Nsukka with his wife purposely to take charge of Red Cross relief operations confirmed that there were six detention camps within his area of responsibility, two at Makurdi and one each at Gboko; Nsukka; Enugu and Ogoja. He said that, “the conditions in the camps were much better than expected, though earlier on there had been strong indications of people being taken off and killed, but the best way of stopping this sort of thing was to maintain proper “camp registers”, an idea that was later implemented.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> United Nations Digital Archives, United Nations Press Services, 1968. Second Interim Report by Representative of Secretary-General to Nigeria on Humanitarian Activities. New York: Office of Public Information Press Release 8G/1717, 30 October 1968, 2. File No. S-0884-0014-00001.

<sup>18</sup> ICRC Resources Involved in Nigeria/Biafra Relief Action, Mid-May 1969. Geneva: ICRC Press and Information Service No. 177b, 5-6.

<sup>19</sup> The National Archives, Kew London. Minute on Situation in the Liberated Areas of the East from M.J. Newington of the British High Commission in Lagos to P.D. McEntee of the

### Federal Army Guarding Biafran Prisoners



FEDERAL TROOPS GUARDING IBO PRISONERS

**Source:** Lateef Olayinka, Nigeria: Drums of Defeat. *Times*. 6<sup>th</sup> October, 1967, 1.

Similarly, the delegate of the International Committee of Red Cross, Dr. Georg Hoffmann who spent much of his time visiting the prisons and detention camps in Lagos area said that, “treatment of the captors mainly the Igbos was extremely good. At the last count, out of the 750 civilians in the area seventy persons were POW.”<sup>20</sup>

Since the advancement of Federal troops across Biafran territory, more people were moved to various camps on daily basis. When the numbers of people in the camp as the case in Nsukka increased rapidly the military authorities have difficulties in coping with this amount of prisoners.<sup>21</sup> In

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West and General African Department of British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 20th January, 1968, File No. TX 10/16/Part B/6c/1066/West and General African Dept./Nigeria, Defence: Military Operations Against Biafra, 1st January, 1968-31st December, 1969.

<sup>20</sup>The National Archives, Kew London. Minute on Situation in the Liberated Areas of the East from M.J. Newington of the British High Commission in Lagos to P.D. McEntee of the West and General African Department of British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, 20th January, 1968.

<sup>21</sup> The National Archives, Kew London. Minute on Red Cross Developments from British High Commissioner in Lagos Sir David Hunt to Commonwealth Office, telegram no. 38, 28th October, 1967.

Onitsha and Asaba areas visited by the UN Observers prisoners of war were not detained but after interrogation were sent to Lagos the Headquarters of the Supreme Military Command. On the southern front, however, there were prisoners of war camps in Port Harcourt and elsewhere. The prisoners appeared to be in relatively good physical condition, except at Port Harcourt where ten officers and one hundred men evidently lacked exercise and adequate sanitary facilities. This was brought to the attention of the divisional commander and on the second visit the following week, improvements were made including exercise and plans were considered to move the prisoners to less crowded conditions. During both visits prisoners expressed the wish to be visited by the International Committee of Red Cross. The impression derived from private conversations with the prisoners of war was of a positive attitude on the part of the Federal authorities.<sup>22</sup>

The team visited Ikot Ekpene Prison, formerly civil one, and there saw 379 prisoners of war, 235 Biafran Organization of Freedom Fighters and 23 suspected Biafran Organization of Freedom Fighters. They did not appear to be undernourished but were dirty and possessed only a minimum of clothing usually a ragged pair of shorts. The reason for this was that they had discarded uniforms and arms before surrendering or being captured. These prisoners of war had spent, on average, only a few days in captivity. Inevitably, the inmates of Ikot Ekpene Prison were very overcrowded. It was the declared intention of the federal troops to evacuate them as soon as possible. The remaining prisoners of war, some 1,500, had been dispatched to Port Harcourt where the federal army provided them with shorts and vests.<sup>23</sup>

Civilians were detained in some places. In Port Harcourt about one hundred and twenty persons were housed in extremely crowded conditions where they had been detained for a considerable time, some up to four months. Food appeared sufficient, but the cramped conditions and inadequate sanitary arrangements had contributed to their bad physical conditions and there had been several cases of chickenpox among the prisoners of war. When the situation had been brought to the attention of the military authorities, assurances were given that within the framework of security the

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<sup>22</sup> United Nations Digital Archives, United Nations Press Services, 1968. Second Interim Report by Representative of Secretary-General to Nigeria on Humanitarian Activities. New York: Office of Public Information Press Release 8G/1717, 30 October 1968, 2. File No. S-0884-0014-00001.

<sup>23</sup> „Text of Report by Observers Who Visited Biafra” *New York Times*, 17 January 1970 <https://www.nytimes.com/1970/01/17/archives/text-of-report-by-observers-who-visited-biafra.html>.

detainees would be moved to other accommodation and visited by a Red Cross doctor.<sup>24</sup>

In the prison at Kwale, one hundred and twenty Igbo detainees were held together with sixty common law offenders. Their accommodation was simple but adequate; they received three meals a day and seemed to have good facilities for exercise. The detainees had been kept for about a year for their own protection. At Calabar another sixty Igbo were also held in protective custody. Their physical condition appeared adequate but no specific cause was given for their detention, nor was its duration specified. The authorities stated that concern for their safety was the principal reason for not returning those Igbo to their former homes, mostly in areas inhabited predominantly by non-Igbo peoples.<sup>25</sup>

Between four to five hundred prisoners were imprisoned in Lagos at Kirikiri and Ikoyi prisons. Many prisoners told observers that they were obliged to sleep on the cement floor and did not have enough blankets to sleep with. Those available were old and thin. The prisoners of war had only the little clothing they wore, and in many cases showed every need of replacement. The most serious criticisms of conditions were concerned with the overcrowding of prisoners of war in their cells and the lack of necessary opportunities for exercise or other constructive activity.<sup>26</sup>

Both at Kirikiri and Ikoyi prisons, the POWs made up only a small percentage of the total prison population which was otherwise composed of ordinary criminals, suspects awaiting trial, and civilian detainees. Some effort was made to keep the prisoners of war apart but in the cramped conditions this could hardly be effective. A number of civilians were detained by the authorities in various places. The reason for their detention was unknown. It was observer's opinion that the more rapidly detainees could be released and enabled to return to normal life, the better this would be for the relaxation of tension among the peoples of Nigeria.<sup>27</sup>

The care and custody of prisoners of war, once they had been moved away from the divisional areas, was assigned to the civil prison authorities and

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<sup>24</sup> United Nations Digital Archives, United Nations Press Services, 1968. Second Interim Report by Representative of Secretary-General to Nigeria on Humanitarian Activities. New York: Office of Public Information Press Release 8G/1717, 30 October 1968, 2. File No. S-0884-0014-00001.

<sup>25</sup> United Nations Digital Archives, United Nations Press Services, 1968. Third Interim Report by Representative of Secretary-General to Nigeria on Humanitarian Activities. New York: Office of Public Information Press Release 8G/1717, 21 November 1968, 2.

<sup>26</sup> United Nations Digital Archives, United Nations Press Services, 1968. Third Interim Report by Representative of Secretary-General to Nigeria on Humanitarian Activities. New York: Office of Public Information Press Release 8G/1717, 21 November 1968, 2.

<sup>27</sup> The National Archives, Kew London. From British High Commissioner in Lagos Sir David Hunt to Commonwealth Office 2 October, 1967.

consequently prisoners of war were subjected to much the same regime as common law offenders and civilian detainees. The limited prison facilities resulted in extreme overcrowding and the available medical services were inadequate. Prisoners also lacked opportunities for exercise and spent too little time in the open. Some prisoners even claimed that they had never been soldiers at all and objected to being considered prisoners of war.

In Biafra, provision of food to POW's was very difficult in a country where the inhabitants themselves have insufficient food to eat. This was an acute problem. Although the detaining Power was responsible for the feeding of POWs, the ICRC decided to make it its duty to supply a large part of their rations by providing the protein foods they required. This was no mean undertaking, and to make it practicable the POWs should be concentrated in one or two camps, to the exclusion of any other detainees. However, in Biafra there were no camps or prisons fulfilling these conditions, and for the several hundreds of POWs the authorities were obliged to convert schools into POW camps. The security problems involved could be wellbeing imagined.<sup>28</sup> The air raids unleashed in warzones prompted the civilians to seek for refuge in the bush where they believed to be the safest place to hide. But it was not an easy task going into the bush for many that went were captured by soldiers of both sides. Prisoners' fundamental human rights were deprived and subjected to unjust treatments. When the numbers of people in the camp increased rapidly the military authorities have difficulties in coping with the prisoners. They were exposed to hard conditions, hunger and sicknesses which made it difficult for some of them to survive the civil war.

### **Conclusion**

At the time the Nigerian Civil War began it was already certain that the conflict would attract huge number of captives. Many people were unaware about the beginning of the civil war. When military confrontation began people started running helter skater not knowing where to hide for safety. As military operations intensified both soldiers and civilians fleeing the warzone were captured and held as prisoners either by the Federal or Biafran army. The growth of displaced persons took place alongside with the high increase of POWs who were seeking for safety but were never lucky having been captured by the troops. The soldiers had assorted prisoners of war to the extent that they did not know how to carter for them. Prisoners of war are normal occurrence in any war. The only thing the Geneva Convention frowns on is the torture or execution of POWs. Lack of needed resources hampered the effective management of prisoners of war during the civil war. When the rights of the prisoners are not being protected there could be chaos and violence. That was the reason the UN appointed the observer team to visit the prisoners of war as

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<sup>28</sup> ICRC Resources Involved in Nigeria/Biafra Relief Action, 6.

parts of its humanitarian agenda during the civil war. The world body did everything possible to deviate from political involvement in the conflict rather supported humanitarian operations championed by international voluntary organisations Such as the International Committee of Red. The conflict was a testing ground for global human rights campaign of the 1960s and 1970s. The consciousness of providing basic needs for survival of the POWs was on the front burner of human rights activism in the conflict targeted at salvaging them from untold hardship. POWs were an important set of people whose predicaments attracted the attention of the UN and ICRC. It was not possible to abandon them to suffer to death rather they were given special treatment through provision of medical and food items especially when many of them became infected with different kinds of diseases and emotional trauma. The treatment of the POWs was part of the success story of the humanitarian operations of the civil war which would not have been possible without international collaboration and effective administration of humanitarian operations. The necessity to provide equal access to basic needs for it they had basic rights to be treated in line with the international norms of human rights and dignity of person.