



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE
OFFICE of the HISTORIAN

Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968

Volume XXIV, Africa, Document 398

398. Memorandum From Edward Hamilton of the National Security Council Staff to the President's Special Assistant (Rostow)¹ (#fn1)

Washington, August 12, 1968.

WWR:

- SUBJECT
- Status Report on Nigeria

I thought it might be useful if I elaborated on the points I was making this morning. The Nigerian problem has not changed much in your absence, except to get progressively worse. It now stands as follows:

1. The two sides are in conference in Addis under the auspices of the OAU and the Chairmanship of Haile Selassie. The Feds have tabled a 9-point peace plan which, though still demanding that the Biafrans renounce secession, is by far the most realistic proposal yet offered. The proposal promises outside truce supervision by a neutral force (perhaps composed of Indians, Canadians and Ethiopians) an Ibo-dominated government for the Ibo heartland, a largely Ibo police force in Ibo areas, guarantee against a flood of Federal troops into Iboland, and a somewhat qualified promise of amnesty for the rebels. The Biafrans have flatly and publicly rejected this scheme, because it would require them to give up secession. As of Friday night, our people in Addis thought there was little hope that the talks would survive this week.
2. However, H.I.M. took things in hand and made it very difficult for either side to walk out. They are meeting again today on the basis of his secret proposals (to which we are not privy). Our betting is that Selassie is trying to get agreement on relief as a separate matter from the political settlement, which apparently is not yet possible.
3. We are doing everything we can—which is really very little—to help the Addis talks along. The President approved and sent a public message to H.I.M. before the start of the talks, as well as a confidential message to Houphouet-Boigny, who is likely to be the strongest influence on the rebels. We also made a demarche with Gowon in Lagos. We have now sent contingency messages from Rusk to H.I.M., to be delivered if the talks break down, which press for agreement on relief whatever the status of the political issues.
4. On the relief front, there has been little but frustration. Estimates of the extent of suffering vary, but the range (e.g., 400–600 per day passing the point of no return of protein starvation) are sufficiently horrible to make the differences

meaningless. The Red Cross has been flying 16–20 tons of food a night in its lone DC–4 (3 more DC–4's are due soon). Even these flights have now been stopped, however, because Biafran arms planes have taken advantage of the reduced flak Gowon puts up against mercy flights, so that Gowon has stopped making any special provisions and the Red Cross has had some near misses. Thus, at the moment there is no relief food at all getting into Biafra.

5. Nor, I am afraid, is there a dependable mechanism for getting food in if the political settlement came tomorrow. The Red Cross has been woefully slow and ineffective in arranging the logistics, and I am afraid our Mission in Lagos is too sensitive to the feelings of the Federal Government to have done much pushing.

6. Today, therefore, we launched Bob Moore, Joe Palmer's Deputy, to Geneva to try to (a) get the Red Cross thinking in terms of the airlift proposition I mentioned this morning, and (b) get the machine built which could provide the food if the politics will allow. Moore's dispatch was made with a reasonable fanfare, which should help some at home.

7. The constraints on relief remain unchanged. The Nigerians will allow a land corridor, but not an airlift unless we can guarantee it won't be used to aid arms shipments to Biafra. Biafrans will accept food by air but not by land, on the ground that any food which passes through Federal territory is likely to be poisoned. The Red Cross will not engage in any relief operation which does not have the explicit approval and full cooperation of both sides.

8. There is one possible break this afternoon. The Red Cross thinks Ojukwu is about to agree to set aside a particular airstrip solely for relief use. The Red Cross has instructed its Lagos man to try that out on Gowon. This may work, although Gowon is under immense pressure from his hawks (which include almost the entire Hausa population) not to allow any relief, particularly any which involved air traffic into Biafra.

9. All of this is happening in the shadow of what is pretty clearly a buildup for a new Federal offensive designed to take the 10,000 square miles still held by the rebels. Joe Palmer, who has just returned from Nigeria, thinks this will happen within the next couple of weeks. There are also mounting reports on increased Biafran military activity, allegedly (though probably falsely) led by French officers. If either or both sides take the offensive, the relief problem becomes almost impossible. We have had a strong go at the Feds on this point, but their answer is a forbidding "The other side has left us little choice."

10. The public pressure here mounts daily. Biafran starvation has been front page news almost constantly while you were away, and I have learned this afternoon that *Time* now plans to do next week's cover story on this problem. American opinion is heavily pro-Biafran, though without much knowledge of the facts. Both the Vice President and Senator McCarthy have issued very strong statements urging that we "cut red tape" and "do more than futile gestures."

Unless Haile Selassie can bring off a miracle, we're clearly down to the nitty gritty on this one with no solution in sight. Gowon cannot accept Biafran secession and hold his Government and the rest of the Federation together. Ojukwu, bolstered by De Gaulle and Houphouet-Boigny, still believes he is better off holding out than allowing his troops to be disarmed and risking slaughter of the Ibos. The Red Cross is slow, timid and inept. The Brits are acting as though they have decided that the only solution is a military solution imposed by Gowon. The French are actively pro-Biafran. The OAU is pro-Nigerian but split by the fact that four of its members recognize Biafra. The Russians are largely disinterested and identify with the Nigerians to the degree that they are interested. U Thant and the Pope make strong statements but are largely powerless.







Our own approach has been and is to (a) stimulate the Red Cross to serve as the international cover for a relief operation; (b) press, largely confidentially, on both sides to agree to a settlement, or at least to a relief agreement; (c) offer any and all help necessary to make a relief operation work; (d) push particularly hard on Gowon to dramatize the fact that it is not the Federal Government that is keeping the food out of Biafra; and (e) work out the logistics of the relief scheme so that it is ready to move as soon as political arrangements are made.

As I told you this morning, my own view is that our best hope is to persuade Gowon to permit air drops of food from planes departing from Federal territory. This would allow him to inspect cargoes to be sure there are no arms; dramatize the fact that he wants to aid the hungry; and it would actually move sizeable amounts of food into Biafra. From here on in it's a race between this scheme and the military offensive we think is planned.

EH

¹[\(#fnref1\)](#) Source: Johnson Library, National Security File, Country File, Nigeria, Vol. II, Memos & Miscellaneous, 8/67–1/69. Secret.

View Image

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Persons

- [Hamilton, Edward](/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/persons#p_HEK1) (/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/persons#p_HEK1)
- [Ojukwu, Lieutenant Colonel Chukwuemeka Odumegwu](/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/persons#p_OLCCO1) (/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/persons#p_OLCCO1)
- [Rusk, Dean](/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/persons#p_RD3) (/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/persons#p_RD3)

Abbreviations & Terms

- [OAU](/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/terms#t_OAU1) (/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v24/terms#t_OAU1)
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