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Challenges of Propaganda to Effective Humanitarian Operations in Intra-State Violent Conflict: A Study of the Nigerian Civil War, 1967-1970

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the extent to which propaganda negatively affected humanitarian operations in the Nigerian Civil War. The belligerents in the Nigerian conflict employed extensive propaganda, using relief to pursue their predetermined ends. The distortion and delay of humanitarian operations caused by propaganda led to the death of millions of people in Biafra. It must be noted that even when malnutrition and starvation began to have unprecedented effect on Biafrans, the federalists through their propaganda machineries countered this development by claiming that the horrifying pictures and reports were Biafra's propaganda. Through extensive propaganda, parties to the conflict and their foreign backers exploited the miseries of the civilian victims of the war for their political gains. It is against this background that this study argues that propaganda had unprecedented negative impact on humanitarian operations during the crises. This study adopts the historical and qualitative research methods. It concludes among other things that propaganda has the capacity to delay, distort or permanently prevent effective humanitarian operations in intra-state violent conflicts.

Keywords: Biafra, Civil War, Humanitarian Operations, Nigeria, Propaganda

INTRODUCTION

The Nigerian Civil War witnessed effective use of propaganda and this had unprecedented impact on humanitarian operations during the conflict. The belligerents in the civil war and their supporters both within and outside Nigeria employed propaganda extensively in their attempts to: project their respective causes to the outside world: counter propaganda emanating from the other camp; as well as support their war

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efforts. It must be noted that soon after the commencement of the Nigerian crisis, the suffering of the civilian population particularly on the Biafran side gradually became the concern of the outside world and this led to the intervention of some humanitarian agencies, religious bodies and some national governments. The use of propaganda as an integral part of waging war has been a basic part of human history. It is pertinent to note that in war situation propaganda is often designed to stiffen the fighting spirit of entire nation, create fear of defeat, raise funds, as well as encourage enlistment to halt perceive or real threat. In addition, it also helps to prolong the fighting and as well create more severe conditions for surrender. Belligerents in the Nigerian conflict pursued the above objectives using propaganda.[1].

The conflict exposed civilian population to untold malnutrition, starvation and diseases such as Kwashiokor which spread like a wide fire in the areas affected by the war. The level of human catastrophe which occurred in the civil war especially on the side of the Biafrans made humanitarian operations in the conflict inevitable and most of the actions and inactions of the relief agencies were greatly influenced by belligerents and their backers. Therefore, in Biafra, starvation, malnutrition and infant and maternal mortality had a high incidence. The emergence of the war destroyed further sources of protein, notably the cattle-raising districts of north-east Biafra, much of the fish from the riverine areas and the vital imports of Norwegian Stock-fish. It must be noted that by the end of 1967, the situation in Biafra had reached a crisis proportion, forcing the churches in Biafra to make their first public appeal for help to the outside world[2].

The Use of Propaganda to Justify or Condemn the Total Blockade and its Humanitarian Consequences

The total blockade carried out by the Federal Government of Nigeria against the secessionist Biafrans served as a major source of propaganda to the two conflicting parties and their cronies in the civil war. In other words, the belligerents in the Nigerian conflict and their supporters made use of propaganda extensively to either justify or condemn the total blockade imposed by the federal government of Nigeria against Biafra. This in turn had unprecedented effect on humanitarian operations throughout the remaining part of the civil war. The Nigerian crisis swiftly grew into a total war with the deaths of innocent civilians as a result of starvation, greatly exceeding the losses on the battle field[3]. The situation in Biafra was such that attracted many national governments. For instance, on 3 September 1968, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden called on the United Nations' Secretary-General Uthant to urgently address Biafra's suffering[4]. According to Abban Eban, the then Israeli Prime Minister as quoted by Siyan Oyeweso work in his work "The 1966 Coup D'état and the Nigerian Civil War"; "Israel had exerted itself to such extent in providing aid to the former secessionist regime that if another dozen or twenty countries had done so, the result of the war could have been different"[5]

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Affirming how the blockade against Biafra led to the use of effective propaganda by the Biafran authorities, Ola Balogun argued that "soon after the war started, the stage was thus set for one of the most gigantic propaganda operations of modern times. The Federal blockade of the secessionist territory, along with the influx of refugees fleeing from the war front and the chronic shortage of protein collectively created opportunities for the effective use of propaganda" by the secessionist group.[6]

The Nigerian government also mounted effective propaganda to suppress Biafra. It made use of the media to dish out information, both true and false, to confuse and to attract the sympathy of the International Community. The use of propaganda yielded serious gains to the Nigerian government as it prevented many nations from sympathizing and recognizing Biafra[7]. Meanwhile, the food situation in Biafra was a serious source of worry, both to the military and the civilians. In fact, one of the greatest problems in Biafra during the civil war, in addition to the military situation was food scarcity. It was a strong weapon used to destabilize the Biafran military and the civilians.[8]

The Biafrans paid a great humanitarian price by losing a greater part of her territory to the Nigerian government. The famine worsened as the war raged and as the traditional Igbo society of farmers could not plant their crops. The cutting off of Biafra from the sea by the Federal Army, denied the Biafrans the opportunity to receive both military and humanitarian supplies. The effect of the total blockade on the Biafran population was quite dehumanizing. For instance, by the beginning of the dry season of 1968, Biafran civilians and soldiers alike were starving to death. Bodies lay rotting under the hot sun by the roadside and the Vultures could be seen circling, waiting and watching patiently to descend on these carcasses. At the height of the blockade and "Starve them into submission" policy, employed by the Nigerian government upward of fifty thousand Biafran civilians most of them babies, children and women were dying every single day.[9]

It is germane to note that as the humanitarian situation in Biafra continued to deteriorate, the use of relief for propaganda became the major concerns of the Nigerian and Biafran leaders. The suffering and loss of lives orchestrated by the total blockade became secondary to the belligerents as each jostled for supremacy in the psychological warfare. The obsession with the military and political aspects of the war which was equally strong on both the federal and Biafran sides turned relief into a matter of great political and military significance[10].

The leader of the Biafran group Odumegwu Ojukwu continued to condemn in a very strong term the total blockade that was ravaging the secessionist group. He maintained that for two years the Biafrans have been subjected to total blockade and that even though the First and Second World Wars were bloody and protracted at no stage in those wars did the white belligerents carry out a total blockade of their fellow whites. Ojukwu went further to state that;

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> In each case where a blockade was imposed, alliances were made for certain basic necessities of life in the interest of women, children and other non-combatants. Ours is the only example in recent history where a whole people have been so treated[11].

The Biafran leader went further to ask rhetorically "what is it that makes our case different? Do we not have women, children and other non-combatants? Does the fact that they are black women, black children and black non-combatants make such a world of difference" He went further to accuse the Nigerian government of embarking on a crime of genocide against the people of Biafra by first mounting a total blockade against the Biafrans.[12]

Ojukwu also accused foreign powers supporting Nigerian government of covering up their designs and deceiving the black world by blaming Biafrans for the continuation of the blockade and for the starvation and suffering which that entails. The white powers supporting Nigeria was also accused of upholding Nigeria's proposals on relief which in any case they helped to formulate as being satisfactory[13].

The humanitarian crisis in Biafra was subsequently exposed to the American audiences when Mr. Richard Nixon the then American Presidential candidate made the following statement as quoted in George Knapp's *Aspects of the Biafran Affair: A Study of British Attitude and Policy towards the Nigerian-Biafran Conflict argued that "t*he terrible tragedy of the people of Biafra has now assumed catastrophic dimensions. Starvation is daily claiming the lives of an estimated 6,000 Igbo tribesmen, most of them children. If adequate food is not delivered to the people in the immediate future, hundreds of thousands of human beings will die of hunger"[14]……

On the federal side, it was very difficult to convince their leaders that the United State of America and other Western European powers were only interested in helping starving Biafran children. In fact, authorities from the federal side constantly accused international relief organizations of interfering in the internal affairs of Nigeria. Therefore, at the meeting with the representatives of the international relief agencies operating in Nigeria on 19 July 1968, Major-General Yakubu Gowon emphasized that political interference would not be tolerated from any relief agency. Gowon specifically accused OXFAM and CARITAS of paying for space for relief supplies on the same aircraft that carry arms and ammunitions

The constant use of the blockade for propaganda by the Nigerian and Biafran authorities misled the international community into believing that the humanitarian situation in Biafra does not require urgent third party intervention. Odumegwu Ojukwu, the Biafran leader continued to condemn the Nigerian government's lackadaisical attitude towards the humanitarian crisis in Biafra by arguing that the war

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started off by an attempt to starve Biafrans into submission through the total blockade. He went further to accuse the Federalists of playing politics with the humanitarian emergency in Biafra, noting that "the Nigerian government do not want to appear wicked to the outside world, and that for a long time, they tried very hard to pretend over the real issue and to appear as if they were anxious" for welfare of the civilian population[15]. The Biafran leader went further to note that a very clear example of Nigeria's nonchalant attitude to hunger and suffering of civilians can be seen in the Ikot Ekpene sector, where in the course of some twelve weeks occupation, the federalists reduced every single living human being that remained behind to a mere skeleton through ruthless starvation.[16]

It must be noted that both conflicting parties in the Nigerian crisis exploited the misery of the civilian victims for their political ends. For instance, while the Nigerian government was convinced that the starvation in Biafra would force Biafra into submission, the Biafran leadership believed that it would rally international support for Biafrans[17].

On the issue of the Biafran leaders rejecting relief, Odumegwu Ojukwu continuously blamed the British government for continuously arming the Nigerian government. In the words of Ojukwu;

> In its effort to confuse and mislead the world, the British government has tried to misrepresent and distort our position with regard to (a) our refusal to accept its hypocritical and propaganda motivated offer of relief, and (2) our refusal to accept relief through the enemy by means of the so called land corridor. Our position on the question of relief remains unmistakably clear. We welcome and appreciate offers of relief from all genuine sources including the British public and the British humanitarian organizations not associated with the British government. But we shall never accept such relief and assistance, either directly or indirectly from the British government so long as that government continues to supply to Nigeria arms with which to increase the very conditions the British government professes or desires to relief[18].

The above quote clearly shows the position of Ojukwu over the issue of relief coming from Britain. The continuous supply of arms to the Federal government suggests that British government's relief offer to Biafra was more like playing to the gallery.

The Quick-kill Strategy and its Propaganda Inherent.

The adoption of the quick-kill as a war strategy by the Nigerian government against Biafra created avenue for the use of extensive propaganda by the parties to the war. The

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federalists viewed humanitarian operations as a counterpoise to the total blockade of Biafra, which was one of the most important measures aimed at the suppression of its secession. Therefore, buttressing the above argument Cervenka asserts that "Relief contradicted the theory of a quick-kill professed by the Federal military government on the ground that stopping relief operations would result in the death of many people, but would bring the war to an end, so that many more people would be spared from a similar fate"[19].

Countering the quick-kill theory of the Nigerian government is Suzanne Cronje who argues that it is impossible to make such calculations because when a crisis is acute, the imperative need is to help those who are suffering, without questioning whether it would be more merciful to let them die so that others might survive in the long run. Cronje agreed that relief was a political issue and morality had no place in the policies of those who pursued the war. Cronje went further to condemn Nigerian government's claim that relief operations added to the sum total of suffering and outweighed whatever benefits the relief could bring[20].

John de Jorre in his own perspective argues that the relief crisis in Biafra divided the Nigerian and Biafran authorities within themselves over strategies to be employed. He noted that in the Nigerian government's camp, the hardliners who included some of the leading soldiers, politicians and many top civil servants who were concerned about the growing internationalization and cost of the war, advocated the quick-kill strategy. They believed that starvation was legitimate weapon of war and Chief Obafemi Awolowo defended the concept publicly. The humanitarian rationale behind this argument suggests that a strict enforcement of the total blockade and an all-out military effort to overrun Biafra would bring the war to a relatively rapid end which will save more lives[21].

On the issue of whether starvation is a legitimate weapon of war, Ojukwu continued to attack the Nigerian officials who saw starvation as a legitimate weapon of war. The Biafran leader strongly condemned Chief Enahoro, Mr. Ayida and Chief Obafemi Awolowo over their hard-line position. In an attempt to exonerate himself from blame over the delay in rescuing starving Biafrans. Odumegwu Ojukwu argued that "Biafran authorities have made every effort to accommodate even the Nigerian wishes on this question of relief, but at each stage they move away from the real point. The pile of relief materials rotting away in Lagos while people are dying in both areas (Lagos occupied and our areas) symbolizes Nigeria's politics with relief and her hypocrisy"[22].

On the other side of the spectrum, the moderates on the Nigeria side led by Gowon saw the issue differently. For instance, while sharing the hardliner's conviction that the war should not be internationalized and that foreign relief organizations should respect the sovereignty of Nigeria, they also believed that a "slower squeeze" policy was politically wiser and more realistic. They argued that help for the Biafran civilians could continue

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under the ideal circumstances of night mercy flight which gave cover for Biafra's arms and ammunitions.

Jorre also noted that in Biafra, there were similar divisions. For instance, the hardliners led by Ojukwu took the parts of no compromise, arguing that food and other relief items supplied were unacceptable unless they came from sources and through channels that had no connection with the Federal government of Nigeria and Britain. Secondly, the Biafran hardliners also argued that opening of the relief corridors particularly the much discussed land route would give the federalists crucial tactical and military advantages and that any relief agreement reached by the two parties to the war would automatically affect night mercy flights which favour Biafra's war effort[23].

Therefore, as the belligerents in the war continue to jostle for supremacy in the war of words, death was taking its toll on the starving Biafran masses. Odumegwu Ojukwu continued to criticize both Britain and Nigeria over their plot to invade Biafra through the proposed land corridor. He alleged that the British supply of arms had not ceased[24]. Furthermore, the third point made by the Biafran hardliners according to Jorre was that relief operations as they stood though far from being satisfactory in terms of saving lives at home was projecting Biafra's course abroad. The last point made by the Biafran hardliners was that Biafra could not accept food from the Nigerian authorities because it was "poisoned"[25].

Therefore, the moderates on the Biafran side felt that the scale of suffering in Biafra had reached such a level that an uncompromising attitude towards Nigerian relief proposals was no longer tenable. Their argument was that the Biafrans were the ones dying and not the Nigerians and as such, it will be difficult for the federalists to make major concessions over the relief issues. They also argued that the Biafran leadership should reconsider their position on the issue of relief operations because Biafran civilians were being killed by a war whose primary objective had been their security and prosperity. They noted that the onus for concessions lay unmistakably with the Biafran leadership[26]. Jorre also made a submission that "concessions such as agreement to land corridor or daylight flights under the Geneva conventions need not have ruined Biafra's military capacity. A single narrow land corridor internationally supervised and heavily defended at the Biafra's end would not have laid the country wide open, while other airfields were available for the vital arms flights, if Uli were handed over for relief or suddenly immobilized by the Nigerian government"[27].

It must be noted that since most of the starvation happened in Biafra, which was blockaded, the Nigerian government could not match the public interest which propaganda from the Biafran authorities had on the target audiences both at home and abroad[28].

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Churches were also criticized for not exerting pressure on the Biafran government to soften its terms for a relief corridor. The churches in their response claimed that they did their best in that regard, but did not want to use their ultimate weapon of stopping their relief operations in Biafra, because it would have amounted to playing a game of blackmail with innocent peoples lives. Another important submission as regards the "quick-kill" strategy came from John de St Jorre. He opined that the Nigerian government became embittered for not winning the war and as a result began to look around for excuses. The end product of frustration and anger was the use of propaganda to claim that the relief operations into Biafra especially those run by the churches were prolonging the war unacceptably. Jorre went further to argue that the inability of the Nigerian government to achieve her proposed "quick-kill" made her resort to the effective use of propaganda against the humanitarian agencies.[29]

Relief Corridor as a Major Source of Propaganda

The argument over which corridor relief agencies should use to transport relief materials to Biafra was characterized with political and propaganda statements. The belligerents in the war vehemently disagreed on every issue that concerned relief routes. The parties to the conflict in Nigeria employed propaganda to extensively justify their actions as they concerned the appropriate and favourable corridor. Therefore, the fall of Port Harcourt on 20 May 1968 turned Biafra into a land-locked country. The total blockade (Air, Land and Sea) carried out by the Nigerian government succeeded in cutting off Biafra with all her important supply links with the outside world, thereby exposing the 14,500,000 Biafrans to unprecedented malnutrition, starvation and death.

In July 1968, the Swiss representative of the Red Cross in Biafra Henri Jaggi and the Dutch representative of the World Council of Churches in Biafra Dr. Hernan Middelkoop reported that 11 million Biafrans were in need of immediate help. According to their report, each person requires 100 grams of protein rich food a day (120) grams of dried fish or 0.75 litre of milk. At this period charitable organization of the Roman Catholic Church (CARITAS), the International Committee of the Red Cross, the World Council of Churches and the Oxford Committee for Famine Relief (OXFAM) increasingly carried out relief operations in Biafran territories[30].

Corroborating Middelkoop's view was William Wolf (The Mirror's Diplomatic Correspondent) who wrote on 14 August 1968 that "Unless desperate action is taken now, and at top speed, the war between more than 40,000,000 Nigerians and 10,000,000 breakaway Biafrans will end in massacre. Their main problem: all relief flights into Biafra have stopped because the Nigerians continue to shoot at the planes"[31].

It is very pertinent to note that the humanitarian emergency in Biafra was so severe that urgent airlift on a very large scale was formally organized in August 1968. This operation

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was carried out by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and Joint Church Aid (JCA), the latter consisting of (CARITAS) and the World Council of Churches which represented some 28 churches in 17 Western countries. The size of the humanitarian operations in Nigeria was so large that by the last quarter of 1968 ICRC's monthly budget for Nigeria and Biafra amounted to 1,400,000 pound. The humanitarian crisis in Biafra became more acute as death toll continued to rise. There was the fear that if the death rate was maintained, the entire population of Biafra which was around 5 million in the war affected areas would be dead in less than a year[32].

The above pathetic situation in Biafra did not deter the belligerents and their Cronies from employing propaganda extensively to achieve their political ends. Both parties in the Nigerian crisis deliberately decided to frustrate every effort made at resolving the disagreement over relief. According to John de Jorre:

> All attempts to reach a mutually acceptable relief agreement failed even though every conceivable possibility such as daylight, land, sea and river corridors, parachute drops, aircraft carriers and helicopter were exhaustively considered. And as the war went on and the prospects of a decisive victory or a negotiated peace receded, the grim dynamics of the situation drew the humanitarian organizations deeper into its political turmoil[33]

The above quote shows clearly how inconsiderate the belligerents in the Nigerian crisis were to the suffering and dying Biafran masses. There was a great deal of talk between the two parties to the war with many confusing statements from both sides, but no shift in the basic position of either. The Nigerian government continued to accuse Ojukwu of deliberately using the horrifying situation in Biafra for his political ends. This position was supported by Robert S. Goldstein, the then public relations representative of Biafra in the United States of America who resigned based on his conviction that Ojukwu was using starvation in Biafra to achieve his war plan. Goldstein was disappointed at Ojukwu for walking away in a peace talk while Biafran civilians were dying on a daily basis. He also blamed the Biafran authorities for not accepting the proposed land corridor until there was a complete cease fire, and also for insisting that airlift was the only solution to feed the starving Biafran population[34]. Therefore, in reaction to Ojukwu's nonchalant attitude towards the suffering of the Biafran masses, Goldsten was of the view that the Biafran leader should accept the world help that was offered to him instead of prolonging the suffering of the Biafran civilians by rejecting the offer"[35]

The above quotation clearly demonstrates how different interests determined major issues in the Nigerian conflict. It is therefore, very germane to note that belligerents and their backers used propaganda to pursue these interests, thereby exposing the civilian population to preventable malnutrition, starvation and death.

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Sharing the same view with Goldstein was the Time London which in one of its editorials criticized Biafran authorities for rejecting the Land corridor for relief operations. According to the Times;

> The Biafran objections to the land corridor were "frivolous" he (Colonel Ojukwu), has seen how the desperate plight of his refugees has engaged the sympathy and even intervention of the outside world against the "genocide" that he alleges against Lagos. This amounts to using the misery of his own people to extract diplomatic and other advantages to counter balance his defeat in battle[36].

Therefore, at the OAU Consultative committee meeting which took place from 20 to 26 July 1968 in Niamey issues of relief also took the front burner. At the meeting, the Nigerian government promised to establish a corridor in the territory it controlled to enable the movement of food, medicine, clothing and other relief items to Biafra. In addition, the federalists also pledged to secure members of the international relief organizations entrusted with the task of transporting and distributing these supplies. Nigerian and Biafran authorities failed to reach an agreement on a relief routes.

The Nigerian government's concession centred on offering land "mercy route" which was subsequently rejected by Ojukwu on the ground that airlift was the fastest means of transporting the relief items to the starving Biafran masses. In addition, the Biafran leader also expressed fear that, unless there was an international armed force to police the land corridor, the federalists would turn the land corridor into an invasion path and that the food coming through the federal line was liable to be poisoned. Odumegwu Ojukwu also feared that accepting land corridor would amount to conceding to Federal authority at the expense of Biafra's sovereignty.

The inability of the belligerents to reach agreement on land corridor opened other windows of discussions. For example, in 1968 the Federal government of Nigeria proposed opening of some Sea and River corridors to Biafra as relief routes. However, the Biafran leaders countered it by also proposing different water routes. The failure of the belligerents to reach an agreement over relief routes however, was mainly because each side deliberately proposed routes which it could successfully control. The above idea was revived in June of the same year when Clyde Fergusson, the then United States relief coordinator suggested a plan of using two American ships namely Dona Mercedes and Dona Maria to transport relief items through Federal held territory in Cross River, before using land corridor to complete the delivery chain down to Biafra. This plan was never implemented successfully as the two ships languished in Lagos Calabar[37] harbor for several months before they were surrendered to the Nigerian government.

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It is germane to note that a new suggestion was jointly put forward by Hubert Humphray, Mrs. Martin Luther King and General William Tunner (the director of the 1948 Berlin airlift) to supply food and other relief items to Biafra using Helicopter from a neutral aircraft Carrier lying offshore. Similarly, Sir Alec Douglas Home in the House of common in December 1969 proposed that American aircraft carriers carrying helicopters and British Commando ships should be used on a daily basis to fly large tonnages of food to the starving women and children. This plan failed also failed.

Therefore, as the Biafran authorities continued to insist that the only instrument for delivering relief supplies to her starving civilians effectively must be through airlift, the Nigerian government warned that all the airlifts must be switched to daytime flights since flights of arms and ammunitions might easily operate under cover at night. The Federalists went further to allege that such flights commonly use the same airfields used by the relief flights. It must be noted that as the starvation in Biafra continued unabated, the belligerents in the war remained adamant in reaching a compromise on relief routes and time. The disagreement between the federal government of Nigeria and the International relief agencies reached a climax when on 5 June 1969, a Red Cross DC 7 plane was shot down by the Nigerian Air force planes in daytime.

Humanitarian operations in the Nigerian Civil War continued to be disrupted as a result of deliberate rejections of plans capable of encouraging effective operations by the belligerents. The Nigerian government was offered the right to call down any of the relief planes for inspection at Lagos before continuing their flights to Biafra. Ojukwu on the other hand, rejected this offer and even wanted other relief organizations such as the ICRC to do the same by ignoring the federal order. It must be noted that even though the JCA continued with their night flights of relief items to Biafra after the suspension of relief operations by the ICRC, the quantities of relief items supplied to the starving Biafran civilians drastically reduced, thereby leading to more suffering and deaths by starvation

Conclusion

The Nigerian Civil War witnessed effective use of propaganda, and this to a very large extent affected humanitarian operations. The deliberate use of propaganda by the belligerents to advance their political ends delayed effective responses from relief organizations and religious bodies that struggled to save lives in the war. Propaganda established conditions for human suffering, mass deaths and genocide against the Biafrans. It delayed peace settlement up to the point of permanently inhibiting it. Many more lives would have been saved if the belligerents in the Nigerian conflict had towed the part of peace. The misery of the starving Biafran civilians was used to pursue victory in the war by the belligerents. Therefore, using the Biafran experience in the Nigerian Civil War, this study suggests that in a humanitarian emergency situation, genuine third

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parties should look beyond sovereignty when trying to save lives. This is because hardliners hide under the cover of sovereignty to commit atrocities against real or perceived enemies.

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