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NSC Meeting
February 14, 1969

BIAFRA RELIEF: PRINCIPAL POLICY OPTIONS

SUMMARY

The two main papers -- (a) alternative relief programs and (b) policy options as they affect relief -- highlight the political implications of feeding people in the Nigerian civil war. There is also a very worthwhile Background Paper. The discussion proceeds from the basic premise that any real expansion of present relief will involve -- willy nilly or consciously -- important foreign policy choices for the U.S. The problem boils down to the following:

Relief

1. We simply do not have good hard numbers on food needs in Biafra. Reports from the Red Cross, other relief agencies and individuals range widely -- from a few thousand hungry to millions facing imminent death. We do know there is a continuing protein shortage. We strongly suspect some general carbohydrate famine over the next few months. No one has done a comprehensive survey. The Red Cross is trying to mount one, though without much progress against their own inertia and political suspicions in the war. In any case, complete study may not prove possible where (a) there is general disruption from the war, and (b) much of the population lives (and dies) unseen in the bush. Even trying a study could take several weeks.

The relief operation now feeds about 2 million in Biafra and 1 million on the Federal side.

2. Our most reasonable estimates of Biafran need range from 1.5 million to 3.5 million (of 5-7 million total population) between February and June.

3. It would require 30,000 tons per month to meet the maximum estimated need of 3.5 million at the survival level of calories.

4. Technically, the present relief operation can be expanded substantially in 30 - 60 days. The alternatives:

Course A, Present night flights	= 8-10,000 tons monthly
Course B, Expand night flights	= 14,000 tons monthly
Course C, Add daylight flights	= 18,000 " "
Course D, Land corridor	= 30,000 " "
Course E, River corridor	= 30,000 " "
Course F, Add Air drops	= 20,000 " "

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5. The major obstacles are political. All flights and any corridor would cross Federal territory. Any expansion by more flights or adding air drops requires (a) Federal acceptance if the planes are not to be in danger of attack and (b) Biafran acceptance if flights are to be allowed to land, or air-dropped food is to be distributed. An effective relief corridor requires Federal approval and Biafran acceptance of the food.

6. Biafra has so far blocked both daytime flights into their one working airstrip and various proposals for a land corridor, ostensibly for military reasons. The Federals reject air drops as potential gun running and a river corridor as a military disadvantage.

Policy

7. Our present policy is to avoid direct involvement in politics or relief, yet get in as much food as possible. We recognize Nigeria and endorse peaceful reunification. Yet we also finance 60% of the relief operation. This means formal, legal (and limited) support for the Federal side as against de facto (and critical) support for Biafra through relief.

8. This contradiction has brought us near the breaking point with the Federals. They see increased relief -- without balancing support for them -- as taking sides with the rebels.

9. The U.S. sale of 8 old transports to the relief operation last fall brought an angry outcry from the Federals. All our experts agree that another expansion, in the context of present policy, will probably provoke a crisis, perhaps involving violence to our 5,200 citizens in Nigeria. Yet present relief prospects are by all odds not adequate to the need, which leaves us under a moral dilemma and mounting domestic pressure.

Basic Choices

10. We face two basic choices in considering expanded relief to Biafra:

FIRST. We can stay with the relief prospects (limited) of present policy -- which is Option 1 of the NSC policy paper. Or we can choose more relief, at the price of varying degrees of support for one side or the other.

SECOND. If we decide to expand relief beyond present prospects, we can move toward more support to Nigeria to offset and thus allow the greater de facto help that more relief gives Biafra. (Options 2 and 3)

Or we can shift away from Nigeria toward Biafra. (Options 4, 5 and 6)

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The Options

Option 1. Enlarge relief with acquiescence of both parties.

The central argument for present policy is that this is all we can do without risking greater involvement on treacherous and unpromising ground. The U.S. should not interfere in what the Africans, the UN and the FMG regard as a local problem, and only the two sides can decide to break the impasse in the war or in relief. Meanwhile, we can urge from the sideline, contribute generously to relief, and keep our hands clean with a strict humanitarian concern.

The objection is that none of this gets the relief job done. Others have been shown powerless. The parties are so far obdurate. Our support could be decisive for either side. Moreover, as the suffering mounts, we are open to the charge, here at home especially, that we did not do all we could diplomatically short of a military intervention no one recommends.

NEXT STEP. The burden of these papers is that the situation now requires more than the present level of U.S. action and involvement. The thinking throughout the Government, however, if that the next step should be carefully measured to minimize the political price we pay in an effort to expand relief. This consensus points toward Option 2.

Moving Toward Federal Nigeria

Option 2. Enlarging relief by agreement of both sides, or at least the Federals.

This requires a U.S. initiative to bargain greater political support for the Federals in return for their agreement to put into actual operation a land corridor or daylight flight plan. We would seek Biafran cooperation, but not shrink from confronting Biafra with a publicized choice to accept or reject food at the point of exchange. This puts our prestige and logistic support behind the most effective relief systems. We would seek African cooperation, but not wait on it.

The main virtue of this option is that it constitutes action when all else has failed and prospects are dim. We stand a good chance to parlay our added political support into Federal cooperation on relief. Yet we risk either (a) a Federal turn-down which would leave us still short on relief or (b) a Biafran refusal which might be used against us in skillful propaganda, and the suffering would go on. Failure with this option may point us toward the high risk Option 3.

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Option 3. Meet relief needs by all-out support of Federals.

Most simply, this option trades military aid to the Federals for relief concessions or air drops which would almost literally force food on Biafra. The risks of this course -- at home and abroad -- are amply stated in the paper. Its great virtue is that it is directed toward the end of the war, the only really effective way to get at the suffering in Biafra.

Moving Toward Biafra

Option 4. Enlarging relief without Federal acquiescence.

This option is designed to show the likely outcome if we move much further with relief under the present low-involvement policy toward Federal Nigeria. In effect, we would be meeting Biafran relief needs at the risk of Federal attack on relief aircraft and at the likely expense of both our direct interests and the present relief operation on the Federal side.

Option 5. Enlarge relief without Federal acquiescence and undertake full diplomatic neutrality.

The gains and losses of this option are essentially the same as Option 4 on the relief side. Option 5 has the added dimension of "neutral" diplomacy, so often discussed in public and the Congress. The thrust of the argument is that the diplomatic outlook would be problematical, with the nearly certain prospect of a violent break with the Federal side.

Option 6. Enlarge relief by recognizing and perhaps arming Biafra.

Again, the costs of Options 4 and 5 apply on relief. The advantages, however, are more offsetting in the acquisition and probable survival of a dynamic client. The costs of military involvement parallel those of military aid to the Federals in Option 3. The consensus is that arms aid may force a still deeper embroilment in the problem, whichever side is the recipient.

Keeping Options Open

The papers do not address explicitly the question of sequence in the adoption of options. Nor do they pose specific options as hard and fast plans which would rule out considerable overlap in action. It is useful to note, however, that some options -- as described -- clearly do rule out others. With Options 4, 5 and 6, to the degree they proceed from a break with the Federals, a basic choice has been made. Likewise, Option 3 with all-out support of the Federals makes a basic choice. Options 1 and 2 preserve basic choices -- but only at the price that their failure will pose them eventually, and perhaps under less desirable circumstances.

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