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PA/HO Department of State
E.O. 12958, as amended
April 21, 2005

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE
WASHINGTON

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December 4, 1969

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

Subject: Nigerian/Biafran Relief

Discussion

A complete impasse has been reached on moving relief into Biafra by daylight airlift. The ICRC airlift is no longer operating and night flights by JCA, the French Red Cross and Africa Concern, all considered illegal by the FMG, are delivering supplies at only half the peak level reached last May.

Present arrangements for getting relief into the enclave are considered by the agencies involved to be both dangerous and inefficient. Prospects for resumption of ICRC relief flights seem remote, given the Biafrans' apparent determination to permit relief flights only at night as cover for the arms airlift. Although both sides have agreed "in principle" on the Cross River surface route, it is doubtful either side is in fact willing to implement the project. Further, the Cross River proposal is not a substitute for relief flights in the near term since the present low water level would limit the amount of relief that could be provided Biafra by this means over the next few months.

Relief into Biafran-held territory thus remains wholly inadequate and the nutritional situation continues to be grave, particularly in the areas away from the zone served by the paved arteries such as the Orlu-Owerri road. Recent samplings by the medical member of a survey team from the office of your Special Coordinator for Nigerian Relief,

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Ambassador Ferguson, reveal that 42 percent of the children are suffering from edema and 52 percent of the adult population. Nearly 100 percent of the people in the bush suffer in varying degrees from malnutrition.

Basic Options

With respect to our future policy on Nigerian relief, we have considered four basic courses of action:

(1) Withdrawal from the Nigerian/Biafran relief effort coupled with the publication of a White Paper on our efforts as justification. In our judgment, from the domestic standpoint and our obligation to the international community, this is not realistic.

(2) Maintain the present level of our support and involvement, that is financial contributions to JCA on their present scale. This course would result in some domestic criticism for inadequacy, but would put increased pressure on others (e.g., the French Red Cross and Africa Concern, etc.) further to increase their relief efforts. We might engage in appropriate diplomatic moves to that end.

(3) Engage our political strength through assurances and guarantees short of the use of force to try to break the impasse over relief arrangements. This course would have to take into account the political cost of obtaining acceptance by the parties of relief arrangements.

(4) Increasing the level of our support for humanitarian organizations that have existing airlift programs for flying supplies into the enclave and providing support to other humanitarian organizations that may initiate airlift relief programs for Biafra. (Support would consist of increased relief supplies and might extend to the provision of additional U.S. aircraft or funds to finance non-U.S. charter aircraft.) This is the one practical course available at the present time to achieve an effective increase in relief flow to Biafra. It would, however, put further strain on our relations with the FMG.

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Future Course of Action

It is still in the U.S. interest, from the humanitarian as well as from the domestic political standpoint, to continue to maximize the flow of relief to the Biafran enclave. It is assumed that domestic political opinion would not at this stage permit disengagement from the relief effort. At the same time, there is an inherent unlikelihood of ever bringing about an agreement between the parties for relief arrangements without impossible political commitments by the U.S. The only feasible course therefore is Course No. 4 of increasing our support to airlift programs capable of ensuring a more adequate flow of supplies.

Implementation - Primary Action

The primary supporting action with which the Department is planning to proceed is:

(1) Increased support for JCA, including acquiescence in the transfer from ICRC to JCA of its C-97's and increased financial assistance to JCA-USA (the American component of the church relief consortium). Two of these C-97's would be positioned at Tel Aviv, the JCA maintenance base, and serve as both a maintenance back-up for JCA and a contingency reserve for ICRC should it fly again. The ICRC would transfer its other two C-97's directly to JCA, one as an additional aircraft already promised and not picked up, and one as a replacement for a C-97 already in the fleet and not economically reparable. Five C-97's instead of the present four will then be positioned at Sao Tome, the operating base for JCA flights into the enclave. Four of these C-97's would be in an operational status and one would be used for back-up purposes. This transfer action by the ICRC would both facilitate overhaul in Tel Aviv of the aging C-97 fleet and assure that four C-97's rather than the present three will be available to fly each night from Sao Tome. It will enable JCA to augment its present airlift capacity by 18 percent or 28 tons over the present 150 ton nightly average.

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(2) Additional increase of JCA tonnage is possible through replacing its fleet of five low capacity DC-6's with higher capacity Constellations and/or C-97's (increase of approximately 26 percent or 40 tons a night) and expanding the facilities at Sao Tome to accommodate two or three more of this size aircraft (an approximate increase of 40 percent or 60 tons a night). These actions could increase the airlift by 85 percent or an average of 128 tons a night above the present level. It would bring us to a goal of 300 tons per night of relief supplies airlifted into Biafra from Sao Tome which is the maximum that could be handled by that base.

Inherent Problems

(1) In adopting the proposed action, which appears at present to be the only viable plan for effecting an immediate resumption of a more adequate flow of relief supplies, we are committing ourselves to a possible collision course with the FMG. The FMG will certainly be aroused over increased U.S. support for what they consider illegal, clandestine operations. The Nigerians would have reason to feel particularly resentful after what they consider to be their forthcoming and constructive response in accepting the ICRC daylight flight proposal. We would seem to be instead rewarding Biafran intransigence on daylight flights and in the face of strong Biafran attacks on the United States. FMG policy is to interdict the night relief flights once their night intercept capability permits them to do so. As a result, the danger of a JCA-operated C-97 being shot down, its American crew killed, captured or tried, and a direct confrontation with the FMG is very real. At the very least, we will have to expect to bear the heat of Nigerian ire and accusations that our policy is pro-Biafran and at the risk of possible reprisals against American citizens and interests.

(2) This risk might be more manageable through efforts to increase the tolerance of the FMG, such as continuation of ICRC's and JCA's daylight flight discussions,

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attempts to provide the FMG with manifests certifying the innocence of JCA cargo, and the possibility of installing an electronics capability offering the FMG positive identification of relief aircraft. The risk may also be somewhat diluted by the ability of Balair (flight contractor for JCA) to recruit foreign crews for the C-97's and by the use of Constellation aircraft.

Supporting Steps

Supporting steps which would help our efforts on Nigerian relief are:

(1) Financial support for supplies or charters to national Red Cross Societies and other humanitarian organizations willing to undertake the previous functions of the ICRC in managing and sponsoring airlift operations into Biafra. Such U.S. support would be channeled through the ICRC which in turn would support existing relief agencies or create new ones to fly relief supplies at night for support of ICRC teams in Biafra. This option may be difficult to implement owing to (a) legal difficulties faced by national societies in flying without a formal ICRC relief agreement, and (b) the unwillingness expressed by several societies to take all the flight risks while the ICRC merely distributes the supplies at the end of the line.

(2) Encourage the ICRC or national Red Cross Societies to negotiate with the FMG and the Biafrans an air drop scheme involving a neutralized drop zone removed from strategic targets.

(3) Explore further the Cross River project by suggesting a third round of talks and seeking some international organization or third party other than the U.S. to sponsor and guarantee the route.

(4) A direct approach to UN Secretary General U Thant to suggest and explain the creation of an Emergency UN Relief Force which among other matters might act as the sponsor and guarantor of the Cross River relief route.

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(5) Support various efforts by the Pope, the Hague Group, and the Swiss for a Humanitarian Truce over the Christmas holidays during which time a massive airlift would be mounted around the clock to inundate Biafra with relief supplies. Encourage these parties to coordinate among themselves and to work through appropriate African leaders who are friends of the FMG and Biafra.

Political Postscript

In the search for settlement of the war, both Gowon and Ojukwu have, in principle, agreed to the Emperor's proposal for confidential, unconditional talks between representatives of the two sides. It is still uncertain whether these preliminary talks will take place and, if they do, even more doubtful that they will lead to serious negotiation. We are continuing to explore what the U.S. and other outside Governments can do to encourage and support negotiations. I have recently held useful talks with the Foreign Ministers of France and Britain during my European trip. We expect to consult further with France and the UK in the next few weeks on specific cooperative measures that can be taken without direct involvement. We are considering US-UK-French diplomatic influence on the two parties; possible help to African mediation efforts; outside assistance in developing a neutral observer force to meet security concerns; and a possible international consortium to offer resources and assistance in postwar reconstruction.

Acting Secretary

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