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January 10, 1970

MEMORANDUM FOR THE PRESIDENT

FROM: Henry A. Kissinger (S-3000) HK  
SUBJECT: Nigerian Situation Worsens

The Nigerian armed forces have continued to apply heavy pressure against the beleaguered Biafrans who are continuing to give up ground. [redacted] advance elements of the Federal forces have entered the outskirts of Owerri, the heavily-populated administrative center. There are also unconfirmed reports that both Owerri and the vital Biafran airfield at Uli are undergoing unusually intense bombardment by Federal aircraft. (Map at Tab A)

We have just been informed by the French that according to their sources [redacted] the Biafran forces have generally collapsed. Accordingly the French government is taking the following actions.

- They have asked the ICRC to begin immediate relief into former Biafran territory.
- They have asked the Government of Cameroon to open their borders to Biafran refugees.
- They have asked U Thant to take steps to allow an immediate increase in the number of observers.

The Director of the Quai's African Bureau has requested that we take common actions in these grave circumstances.

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The practical effect of the French proposals by themselves are minimal.

- We have been pushing the Red Cross to fly into Biafra for months. They will not do so without Federal approval, and the Federals have refused such emergency flights when proposed by the Canadians only last week.
- Opening the Cameroon border is meaningless since the bulk of the Biafran population is totally surrounded by Federal troops and separated from the border by 300 miles of largely trackless ground.
- U Thant has chronically stalled in this problem out of deference to African sensitivities. He is highly unlikely to move fast enough -- or at all -- now that the Feds (and their African backers) have finally won.

My own first reaction is that we should cooperate closely with the French, but we must recognize our problem is as much political -- with the Federals and their British patrons -- as logistical. If the collapse is genuine, the Biafrans are now more immediately threatened by an undisciplined and vindictive Federal army than by starvation.

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