

STATEMENT OF HYMAN BOOKBINDER, WASHINGTON REPRESENTATIVE OF
THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE, BEFORE THE AFRICAN SUB-
COMMITTEE OF THE SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE

October 4, 1968

The American Jewish Committee appreciates this opportunity to add its voice of concern today over the intolerable situation prevailing in Biafra and Nigeria. As the pioneer human relations agency in the United States, we are concerned with the cause of improved human relations for all people -- both at home and around the world.

Our organization's deep commitment to the improvement of human relations around the world has been reinforced in recent years by the special emphasis placed on it by our immediate past President and by our recently elected one. For almost five years, the American Jewish Committee was headed by Mr. Morris Abram, who serves as senior adviser to the United States Mission to the United Nations and as the United States Representative to the U.N. Commission on Human Rights. In August of this year, the Committee elected as its President the former Ambassador to the United Nations and Supreme Court Justice, Mr. Arthur J. Goldberg. His dedication to the cause of human rights, I am sure, needs no documentation at this hearing.

It was therefore entirely predictable and natural that the American Jewish Committee saw in the tragedy of Biafra a special challenge and a special responsibility. I wish to present to you a brief account of our participation, in co-operation with many other groups, and present some recommendations.

While I speak today officially only for the American Jewish Committee, I can assure you that the entire Jewish community is distressed over the tragedy in Biafra and stands ready to do everything possible to bring an end to the suffering and to further the rights of all people and all groups in that unhappy land.

Just two days ago, the Jewish people observed its most solemn holy day, Yom Kippur. To coincide with this day of fasting and prayer, the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council -- the principal co-ordinating body of American Jewry -- issued a statement of behalf of all its constituent national and local organizations on the crisis in Biafra. Because the American Jewish Committee fully endorses this statement, and because it summarizes everything I would like to say today, I offer the text of that declaration:

"As a people, Jews have experienced the agony and the horror of genocidal assault. We cannot be silent in the face of the deliberate destruction of human life in Biafra. In concert with other organizations, we have sought to provide some relief from human suffering among the victims of the cruel conflict raging there. We will double and redouble these efforts.

"But such voluntary efforts alone cannot be adequate to the tragic demands of the situation. Large-scale supplementation of private efforts by governmental programs is essential if the shame of starvation in Biafra is to be ended.

"We call upon the government of the United States to take leadership in organizing with the utmost urgency a massive airlift of food, medical supplies and other necessities to save the famished people of Biafra from the death by starvation that claims thousands daily.

"We urge the United States government to consult with other concerned nations to that end, to raise the matter for priority consideration by the United Nations, with a view to creating under international auspices at the earliest possible time an effective program of humanitarian relief commensurate with the shameful tragedy in Biafra that afflicts the conscience of mankind."

This statement has the support not only of the American Jewish Committee, but of the following national groups:

American Jewish Congress
B'nai B'rith--Anti-Defamation League
Jewish Labor Committee
Jewish War Veterans of the USA
National Council of Jewish Women
Union of American Hebrew Congregations
Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America
United Synagogue of America

and of 81 Jewish community councils in principal U.S. cities.

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The Jewish community has responded to the challenge. But it neither seeks nor deserves any special commendation. It could do no less. The memory of the great holocaust only 25 years ago is too fresh, too painful to permit us to ignore what has come to be known as the eleventh commandment of the Jewish people: "Thou shalt not stand idly by the blood of thy brother." That holocaust should have taught all people, Jews and non-Jews alike, that there must never again be silence in the face of atrocities and human suffering.

We have been inspired by the moral passion, the great courage, and the practical efficiency of the Catholic and Protestant communities. While government leaders and international agencies talked and deliberated, Church World Service and the Catholic Relief Services went about their work and proved that relief could in fact be given. By their actions, thousands now live who might have died and millions more now live with some hope.

Early in August, 21 national Jewish organizations created the American Jewish Emergency Effort for Biafran Relief, under the Chairmanship of Mr. Morris Abram, then President of the American Jewish Committee. In a unique arrangement, the group decided to raise funds for the three principal agencies engaged in getting food and medical supplies into Biafra: the U.S. Committee for UNICEF, Church World Service and Catholic Relief Services.

In the short period of its existence, this Effort has already had impressive results and is another evidence of the readiness of the American people to participate in this humanitarian cause. Almost \$100,000 has been received after publication of newspaper ads in a few cities. (Copy attached.) Initial distribution of funds among the three agencies earlier referred to will make possible the shipment of 20 flights of food amounting to 200 tons, and a flight of medicines from Portugal to Biafra. This effort will continue.

Concurrently with these humanitarian efforts for direct assistance, the various faiths have worked together in the development of pressures on behalf of more determined national and international actions to bring the Biafran tragedy to a satisfactory end. We have participated in two meetings with the Secretary of State, and with other State officials; we have called upon the President to take more action; we have cabled His Majesty Haile Selassie and the heads of the Nigerian and Biafran delegations that met in Addis Ababa.

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Mr. Chairman, rarely have we participated in as frustrating and depressing an experience. Everyone seems to be in agreement. Children shouldn't have to starve while adults work out their differences...there is enough food nearby to save thousands of lives daily if only we can work out the deliveries...both sides to the dispute have been less than co-operative but are now ready to act...There's a lot of 'good talk -- it's hard to get an argument. But no significant breakthroughs are made. The military situation fluctuates from day to day and with it plans for immediate relief. And meanwhile the thousands of deaths continue -- and may even be increasing.

We are keenly aware of the limitations within which our Government, the United Nations, and private groups can appropriately act or even make representations. We are aware of the fine statements made by the President, the Secretary of State, and others. We are pleased that millions of dollars of foodstuffs and supplies have been made available by our Government. We appreciate the continuing diplomatic efforts to bring peace and relief to Nigeria.

But all of this has obviously not been sufficient. There must be a new sense of urgency at all levels. Our voice must be loud and clear -- and our actions must be consistent with our words.

It is unthinkable that the United States, acting in concert with other nations or acting alone, cannot develop and execute a massive air-lift, including the extensive use of air-drops. This would not be interference in the internal affairs of any nation; it would be pure and simple humanitarianism and there could be no voices of dissent.

Hopefully, however, this need not be a unilateral action on the part of the United States. While we should be prepared to make massive contributions to an international undertaking, we should take every possible step to achieve United Nations involvement. Hence, we have noted with much satisfaction the growing interest in the Congress for such involvement. The Senior Senator from Massachusetts, Mr. Edward Kennedy, spoke for millions of Americans when he addressed his colleagues on September 23, and called for American initiative to have the Biafran matter placed on the agenda of the General Assembly, and to have the Secretary General use all of his power and influence to obtain a "mercy agreement."

There is now pending before the Senate a concurrent resolution submitted by the Senator from Wisconsin, Mr. William Proxmire, which would express the sense of the Congress on the need to have the United Nations take action. A similar resolution has been introduced in the House by Representative James Scheuer.

It is our hope that the Congress will adopt this declaration and that our Government will pursue this important goal at the U.N.

Mr. Chairman, the first human right is the right to live -- and that is why we have stressed the immediate need for food and medicines to save human life in Biafra and throughout Nigeria. But life is not the only human right we must help protect in that country -- as we should anywhere in the world.

With life there must also be the right to liberty and to the pursuit of happiness. We cannot airlift liberty the way we can food and medicines. We cannot interfere militarily or otherwise in the internal affairs of that or any other nation. But we must not remain silent on the issue.

We cannot be indifferent to genocide -- whether physical or spiritual. The fierce fighting continuing today, despite seeming odds against the Biafrans, can be explained only by their fears that the end of fighting will not mean the end of terror against them. If their fears are truly unfounded, they must be assured that the world will continue to watch what happens to them, to guarantee that their individual and group rights are respected, that regardless of the political solutions, the human rights of all remain inviolate.

Mr. Chairman, it is very difficult to find anything encouraging in the situation before us today. But, as Shakespeare wrote many years ago, "Sweet (may be) the uses of adversity." The horror of Biafra has evoked a human response in our country -- and in many parts of the world -- that is quite remarkable. It has brought about an unprecedented degree of co-operation among Jewish groups, and among all religious faiths. In a world so torn by conflict and suspicion, the sight of a little child dying has made us all, for the moment at least, color-blind and nation-blind and religion-blind. There is still goodness in the world, waiting to be tapped. We ask only that we be given the chance to do good.

If the United Nations will give us that opportunity -- if the United States will give us that opportunity -- if Nigeria and Biafra will give us that opportunity -- I am confident that the American people will be ready and anxious to contribute generously to this great effort.

In the Hebrew language there is no word for charity. The closest to it is "Tzedakah" -- which actually means righteousness, justice, mercy. In our efforts on behalf of suffering people in a land far away, we offer not charity, but justice.