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PA/HO Department of State

E.O. 12958, as amended

April 21, 2005

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DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

DATE: September 22, 1

REPRODUCED AT THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES

SUBJECT: Ambassador Ferguson's September 22 Meeting with Biafrans

PARTICIPANTS: Dr. Pius Okgibo, Commissioner of Economy
Dr. Ifegwu Eke, Commissioner for Information
Dr. Andrew Onejeme, Biafran Representative in Washington
Ambassador Clyde Ferguson, Jr., U/CF
A. E. Dewey, U/CF
James M. Pope, U/CF

SUMMARY: The main thrust of the arguments of Dr. Okgibo and his colleagues was (1) the United States should move away from its "one Nigeria" policy. (2) the United States should be willing to use economic and diplomatic levels to force Nigeria not to interfere with a relief program. (3) the United States should provide more assistance to Joint Church Aid and other participants in the night airlift to Uli. (4) It is unfair to rebuke Biafra for its reaction to the ICRC-FMG agreement on daylight flights, since two different versions of the ICRC plan are involved. (End Summary)

The Biafrans met with Ferguson for nearly three hours Monday, September 22 for a tour d'horizon. Asked for his impression of the relief situation, Ferguson said "everything is worse than it was in April." He pointed out that last April things were bad but he had felt that with the increase in the airlift "we had turned the corner." But since June, he said, "things have gotten worse and worse and worse."

ICRC daylight flight plan. Ferguson said the United States was "bitterly disappointed" that the plan had not been accepted by Biafra. He said a great deal of diplomatic effort went into getting the FMG to reach agreement with the ICRC.

U/CF:JMPope
(Drafting Office and Officer)

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Okgibo said the problem was the manner in which the matter was handled by the ICRC. "Everybody is talking about the agreement between the ICRC and Lagos as if they are not aware that there are two documents, not one, two documents which are not identical either in terms of spirit or in terms of technical modalities," Okgibo said.

Okgibo said it is premature for either side to be blamed for not reaching agreement. "The ICRC unfortunately," he added, "made a public announcement on the negotiations as if to say this is the end of the road. I don't believe this is the end of the road."

Both Okgibo and Eke emphasized Biafra wanted two assurances that (1) operation of the relief route will not make it easier for the FMG to take Uli, and (2) that there would be continuity.

Eke charged that the FMG's basic objective "is to starve out Biafra" and that disrupting relief operations is in line with that policy. Ferguson told Biafrans "we read your risk different than you did. We think the risk is not that great." Eke said "whether you accept our analysis of the amount of risk involved we do know and believe we are opening ourselves up to a certain measure of risk."

Okgibo took the position that negotiations on daylight flights have advanced "but have not been completed." He told Ferguson: "I don't believe this is the end of the road. This is where your role as coordinator becomes quite crucial in exploring how the two agreements can be reconciled."

Ferguson pointed to three areas of disagreement, saying (1) the technical route is a matter of negotiability without anybody losing face; (2) The FMG reservation on military operations refers to a right to keep up hostile action at night against Uli and is not a license to attack the relief operation; and (3) Biafra's insistence on guarantees is the major difficulty.

Okgibo said the guarantee issue "is not an insuperable problem and should not be a bottleneck to reaching agreement."

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Ferguson sought a definitive statement from the Biafrans on the kind of assurances or guarantees they sought, ruling out the use of military force. "You have a wider choice," Okgibo said, "since you do not turn your own vision to the ICRC as a single operating agency."

Eke told Ferguson "we are for once asking other people to take on the responsibility of accepting Nigeria's professed good intentions." Biafra, he said, doubted Nigeria's willingness to execute the terms of an agreement. "Instead of Nigeria giving us assurances over the radio," he said, "let them give them to you and you let us know."

Okgibo told Ferguson "we find very strong differences in the agreement between the Red Cross and Lagos and there is a need to remove these differences. Some effort should be made either by you or the Red Cross to resolve them. These are not difficulties arising from polemics. They are difficulties of substance."

Ferguson said the United States has not been directly involved in the negotiations. He recalled an earlier agreement that the ICRC would handle daylight flights and the United States would concentrate on the surface route. Ferguson stressed that "a major component of our policy is that relief must go in." The question is, he said, what are we ultimately willing to pay to see relief go in?

He asked the Biafrans "short of military action what kinds of action would be contemplated in the event Nigeria violated the agreement?" He raised this hypothetical situation: From our own analysis we conclude there is a 98 percent probability that no abuse will take place, but if we are wrong and the agreement is violated, what kind of sanction will fit a situation where you say the problem is ensuring a continuing flow of relief?

Okgibo said "once you rule out military involvement there is a whole range of actions, private and public, that can be taken." Ferguson asked would a public reprimand be accepted? "Public reprimand would serve some purpose but does not ensure continuity," Okgibo answered. "A cut off in aid to Nigeria?"

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Ferguson asked. "This would be useful but it does not necessarily ensure the desired continuity," Okgibo replied, declaring "material support to other carriers (i.e. JCA) assures continuity."

Okgibo said a serious problem is that the U.S. mind is fixed on the proposition that if the Red Cross won't carry relief nobody else will. "After the Red Cross halted its airlift, if the other carriers had been able to step up their relief effort," he said, "I don't think the situation would have developed to the present impasse."

Ferguson pointed out the night airlifts from Sao Tome and Libreville have continued because the Nigerian Air Force lacked a night fighter capability. Eke disagreed, saying "They have the will, the technical capability, but they have inadequate information." Eke said Biafra wants to be indemnified, so that any action by Lagos against the relief operation "would not lead to our suffering a disability."

Ferguson said the ICRC-FMG agreement was a viable accord. Eke claimed U.S. was providing relief "to make it easier for us to go back to Nigeria." Ferguson stated that the flow of relief is related to American concern that the asset represented by Biafra be preserved.

Eke said "the reason relief is going in is because there has been a distinct entity called Biafra which has forced its way into world public opinion and has succeeded in having its voice heard." As long as the United States supported a policy that Nigeria should include Biafra, there will be no easy solution to the relief problem, Eke declared.

Okgibo said the United States has spent a lot of effort and funds on the relief issue. "I think you should have been rewarded with better results," he said. "The chances of that reward keep getting slimmer and slimmer," he said.

Okgibo said the FMG, as a result of its June 30 policy statement, had thrown politics "right into the center of the relief effort." Ferguson reminded Okgibo that the government in Lagos is not uniform, not monolithic, that there are differences of opinion ranging from "starving them out" all the way to General Gowon, who legitimately feels "relief ought to

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go in."

Okgibo retorted that "whether you have a soft or hard version, when it comes to action, whether articulated or not, the hard version prevails."

Eke repeated his contention that the relief issue boils down to what the United States prefers, a separate Nigeria and a separate Biafra or one Nigeria.

Ferguson said Biafra's refusal to accept the ICRC plan "has done a great deal of damage to your position in terms of ordinary people who are interested in appearance and not involved in historical nuances." Okgibo said "you can talk about disappointment that the problem has not been solved. This I accept, but not disappointment about Biafra's attitude... I don't think there is good ground in rebuking Biafra for the way it has acted. We don't consider the matter closed. Guarantees in themselves cannot be a stumbling block."

Cross River route. Okgibo said Biafra still believes the surface route is more important than the flights. Ferguson said the route proposal has not been dropped. He recalled that two sessions on the proposal had been held in Geneva and "I intend to try to get a conclusion at the third session in mid-October." Both Ferguson and Okgibo agreed that there is a need to "shore up" the ICRC for a major role in the operations of the route.

One Nigeria concept. Okgibo said the opinion that Nigeria would be better with Biafra in than out "is a fast vanishing one." He said this "provided the underpinning of policy some time ago, but is not an opinion that has held or is likely to hold in the future."

Apart from the humanitarian issue, Ferguson said, "the stakes are so small that there won't be a change in U.S. policy." A definite part of U.S. policy, he said, is the war has got to stop.

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Okgibo said options should be kept open. "Instead of talking about a desired solution, emphasize that what is worked out by the parties concerned is acceptable," he said. "all the help one needs now is diplomatic pressure on both sides and their well-wishers on both sides that any solution they can evolve, whether within the context of one Nigeria, an independent Biafra and Nigeria, would be acceptable. Ultimately, this is in your own interest."

Okgibo said the "moment an outsider begins to prescribe a solution, you are already undermining the possibility of a solution."

Eke said what has been happening in Western Nigeria should not be underplayed. "One can easily see," he said, "that pressure to keep Nigeria united is more from outside than inside." He claimed Nigeria is sustained through a mixture of diplomatic and economic actions of the United States. "I believe," he said, "Nigeria is very happy not because of British support but because the United States implicitly supports her and so does Russia."

Ferguson repeated his point that there is no imperative to change U.S. policy toward Nigeria. 'Why does it become so hard for you to swallow a 'single Nigeria' and then work out what a 'single Nigeria' will be?' he asked the Biafrans.

Okgibo said "the day we say we accept in principle a 'one Nigeria,' Nigeria will say to us, 'if you accept it, then you demonstrate your good intentions by doing "a," "b," and "c.'" He added: "We are not interested in names. What we want is security for our people. This can be worked out at the conference table."

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