

DEPARTMENT OF STATE

Memorandum of Conversation

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DATE: January 17, 1970
TIME: 10:30 am. 2:13
PLACE: Assistant Secretary
Newsom's Office
PUBLIC AFFAIRS
SERVICES DIVISION

SUBJECT: Relief to Former Biafran Enclave

PARTICIPANTS:

David D. Newsom, Assistant Secretary of
State for African Affairs

Holy Ghost Fathers Kevin Doheny
and Kleins

William H. Brubeck, Director
Nigeria Working Group

George Orick

James O. Westmoreland,
Nigeria Working Group

Christopher Beal

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The group which called on Assistant Secretary Newsom was composed of two Irish priests recently evacuated from the enclave and two Americans who have been associated with the "Biafran lobby" in the U.S. The purpose of their call was to lodge a complaint against the USG's alleged "do-nothing" response to the crisis resulting from the Biafran collapse. Their concern centered on two contentions: (1) that an immediate airlift of foodstuffs was necessary to prevent mass starvation; and (2) that the USG was sanguinely endorsing FMG propaganda regarding emergency relief efforts.

On the basis of first-hand impressions from the Holy Ghost Fathers and deductions based on information from other "sources", the group stressed that the food situation in the heartland of the former enclave must have reached desperate proportions. They asserted that any existing food caches in the area would have been emptied in a matter of minutes. Given the factors of pilferage, corruption, etc., they asked how much food could actually have reached those in need by surface transport. They contended that the FMG was issuing inflated statistics on the amount of food stockpiled near the enclave. The two priests reported seeing huge numbers of refugees fleeing northward into the Uli-Orlu area and said that the arrival of 100 tons of food in Orlu was ludicrously short of the requirements. It was preposterous, they said, to claim that two feeding stations at Owerri and Aba could replace the missionaries' network of 1200 feeding centers.

Reference was made to the alarming situation uncovered by Dr. Western (a USPHS member of Ambassador Ferguson's team) last November. Mr. Beal asserted that logical deduction could only lead to the conclusion that the situation had seriously worsened since then. It was pointed out that a high percentage of the people were suffering from edema, a condition which would almost certainly go unnoticed by a layman observer.

The group conceded that the FMG might have the worthiest of motives, but seriously doubted that the Nigerian Red Cross (NRC) could respond effectively to the new challenge, since the NRC had failed to do an adequate job in the past in Federally-controlled territory. Given the magnitude of the feeding problem, they insisted that an immediate airlift was the only answer, particularly to reach bush areas between Okigwi and Awka which purportedly were unreachable by road. It was suggested that the USG should use every means at its disposal to convince the FMG to use the long-established Holy Ghost Fathers distribution network and to airlift supplies into Uli and other airstrips in the former enclave.

The USG was accused of being complacent in the face of what was obviously a desperate situation. Mr. Orick specifically criticized members of the Nigeria Working Group, who he said had given him via phone overly-optimistic situation reports based on unsubstantiated "facts".

In reply, Mr. Newsom emphasized that the USG shared their deep concern for the welfare of the people in the former enclave. He summarized the impressions gained from his recent trip to Lagos, to the effect that he had found no reason to doubt the sincerity of the FMG and nothing to substantiate the earlier spate of allegations regarding genocide and mass starvation. He pointed out that responsibility for public order was passing from the military to the police, that when the fighting stopped refugees began to flow southward, and that medical/relief teams including many expatriates were reportedly moving quickly into the area.

Mr. Newsom stressed the importance of Nigerian control of relief efforts in the interest of national reconciliation. He assured the group that the FMG had indicated a willingness to accept outside assistance as needed, but that the Nigerian authorities would not be dictated to and would make their own assessment of their requirements. He said that the USG did not want to "gild the lily" regarding NRC efficiency, but neither did we want to impede the promising start already made by an over-exertion of "pressure."

He emphasized that the most immediate need was for hard facts from on-the-scene observers, such as newsmen, members of the medical/relief teams, and Lord Hunt. Until this type of information became available in greater quantity the USG, he said, could only reserve judgement regarding the gravity of the situation and the Nigerian response. He reiterated that all of the preliminary reports and assessments had been encouraging and that there was no basis for "exerting pressure" in the absence of up-to-date facts.

Mr. Newsom remarked that, despite formal statements to the contrary, it appeared that the former Biafran distribution apparatus would continue to be utilized, at least during the current emergency phase of operations. He suggested that the Holy Ghost Order might want to use the good offices of Irish Ambassador Keating in Lagos as an appropriate channel to appeal to the FMG for continuing use of the missionaries in the relief efforts.