

Biafra - what's wrong and what's to do - now

by Pete Reeder

Pssst!

Hey, you.

Yeah, you.

I wanna ask you somethin'.

Do your feet hurt? Is your gut bloated? Or does your mouth feel like you've been chewing sand? Are your eyes sunk so far that all you can see is the end of your nose?

No? Oh, I see. You've got nice soft shoes and not a blister on your foot. Your belly's full of good things like pizza and hot dogs. And all of your teeth are spotlessly clean and that orange you just finished sucking was real sweet. And your eyes are as full of sparkle as a bottle of Fresca.

It's the same for me too; and all the other kids here. Feels nice. Too bad it can't be like that for everyone. Not really. I mean, who's going to care about a little spot in Africa called Biafra.

Who's going to care? People are. People who've been there, lived there, worked there. People who know what Biafra means to the men and women who made it, who call it home.

They want you to care

This university is a place of social change. A place where, according to the experts (whoever they may be), the changes that this society needs must originate. The atmosphere that allows the creative and potential of you and I to grow in a way that will be beneficial to this society we should try to improve.

York has this atmosphere. It has the greatest ability to be a voice of change than probably any other university in North America. It is young and growing and can carry this responsibility with it as it grows. But a university is not just buildings and nice dances and football teams. It's you. You're the one who has to make it move; make it be heard by those who don't want to hear or just can't hear. That's why these people want you to care. To give a damn.

One of these people is Mrs. Arthur G. Webster of our Humanities department. Mrs. Webster has spent a good bit of time in Nigeria and of course what has come to be known as Biafra. She was in Nigeria from 1965 till the middle of 1967 and during this time worked as a teacher in Eastern Nigerian villages and later moved to a university city to be with her husband. During her stay she made many friends and came in contact with many people who became a part of what is going on today, and she has obtained a first hand knowledge of the true conditions in Nigeria and seen the seeds of the conflict planted, take root, and grow around her.

Historical beginnings

The major portion of Nigeria's troubles originate in its history. It's the same old story of a colonial power using a country to its advantage and then leaving it to fend for itself.

Prior to 1914 Nigeria was ruled by the British in London as two separate areas. The northern region was left in a pretty well undeveloped state. The natives of the region, of which the majority were (and are) Hausas and Fulanis, combined through intermarriage and became known as The House of Fulani. They were uneducated and fairly primitive, and resentful of their southern neighbors.

The southern region was composed of Yorubas in the west and Ibos in the east.



The southern region was much more developed by the British than the northern region, primarily due to its being bordered on the Gulf of Guinea. The Yorubas were the most westernized and advanced of the three tribes, with the Ibos close behind. The Yorubas and Ibos didn't have much love for each other and both of them cared none for the House of Fulani.

When the country gained independence in 1960, the three regions of the North, West (south) and East (south) were joined in a federal union with each region having its own government.

In the North, the House of Fulani took power, forming the Northern Peoples Congress. In the West the Yorubas dominated with their Action Group and in the East the Ibos took power with the National Council of Nigerian Citizens. The NPC, because of the majority of the country's people belonging to the House of Fulani, could have taken power federally but used a thin coalition with the NCNC to keep some form of contentment in the country.

Nigeria settled down to trying to make the country work as a whole, despite conflicts between the three major ruling tribes.

Starting the slaughter

Things went fairly peacefully until in October of 1965 elections were held in the West for a new government.

It was a farce. Ballot boxes were stuffed or stolen and even candidates disappeared. The result was complete anarchy. It wasn't the first time that rotten politics had shown its face in the West and some people felt a change was needed.

Five high ranking army officers staged a coup, or at least tried. Leading politicians in the West and North were assassinated in a crude form of house cleaning. The attempt failed in the East. The man assigned to carry out the executions failed.

The remainder of the government asked General Oronsi of the army to take over and try to bring things back to normal. Oronsi closed parliament and called the leaders of the coup to his headquarters for a conference. As soon as they arrived he tossed them in jail.

Three of the five leaders of the coup had been Ibos, and were blamed for the turmoil that was now prevalent. In the North riots broke out in which Ibos were attacked and beaten and killed by

mobs of Hausas and Fulanis. 6 months after election Ibos still found it unsafe to show themselves in the North.

General Oronsi himself was an Ibo and although he had tried to bring ease to the country, he and between 200 and 500 of his officers were murdered in their barracks.

Ibos returning to the East from the North were told to return to where they had been and not to worry; things would be all right. And so they went back — to their deaths.

Thousands of men were slaughtered in the north; men of Ibo birth who had lived in the North their whole lives, men of high position; professors, professional men. One airliner landing in Northern territory on a trip from London was boarded by federal Nigerian soldiers and every Ibo on that plane was shot where he sat. Families in the East lost all contact with relatives in the North. Most were never heard from again.

The myths and the media

People who did manage to escape to their homes in the east told of bodies being mutilated, of women whose unborn children had been taken from them, of the total bid to eradicate every Ibo man in Nigeria.

Riots broke out in the East and non-Easterners were attacked by the people. The government tried to hold things in rein and gave money and an escort to the border for every non-Ibo who was wise enough to want to get out.

The Eastern government felt that a separate means of running the country as a whole was needed if there was to be peace. The three governments met in Ghana in an effort to try and find a solution.

The Ibos stated that what would be best for the country would be a political separation of the Eastern government from the Federal government. They did not wish to separate economically or on the basis of national policy.

The federal and regional governments agreed to work something out, but none of the recommendations were put into effect. Then in a swift and unexpected move, the federal government, now dominated by northern interests, declared that Nigeria would be divided into fourteen provinces. Three of these were to be in the East and they were set in such a way that it was obviously an attempt to break Ibo domi-

nance. This was decided without the consent of the Eastern government. On May 30, 1967 the people of the Eastern region declared the independent state of Biafra. They demanded that Northerners apologize for their actions and give reparations to the Ibo people. The answer they received was a Federal blockade. A not very effective one however. It was at this time, that Mrs. Webster left Nigeria.

On July 7, 1967, Federal Nigerian troops invaded Biafra and the war that drags on now began in earnest.

All the forces in conflict against the Biafrans have been termed as **Federal** and **Nigerian** by the press, suggesting that all the people of Nigeria are at war against a radical minority trying to upset a young country for their own selfish ends. The truth is far from that. It is the Northern forces who initiated the struggle and it is they who have carried it through. Another great myth is that the "Nigerians" are fighting for their "sovereignty."

Biafrans are starving

The "Nigerians" are unable to run their own country (the Northern region) because they haven't got qualified people to fill the important jobs. They are bringing in American, Canadian and British people and denying these offices to the Yorubas of the Western region who are well advanced and qualified. Some have been jailed for statements supporting the Ibos in principle and a number have been killed although this has been well hushed up by the Nigerians and won't be found reported in any establishment newspaper.

So now the Nigerians have practically taken all of Biafra and their goal of annihilating every Ibo man is not far from completion. The Biafrans are starving by the thousands daily. And still they will fight on. Reports of preparations for guerrilla warfare by the remaining forces of Biafra have come from people who worked there as volunteers.

Why not surrender, as so many armchair critics have said they should?

The action must be now

Because the Ibos are a proud, dynamic people who have strived to build themselves a world in which ignorance is the exception, not the rule. They are not about to stand by and see all they worked for taken from them. I wonder how many of us would die for a place like York if the need ever arrived?

And now that we've reached this point where all has been said, do we act? Do we say, "Stop!" Or do we go back to playing cards in the JCR, cutting up Versafoods and bitching about the lousy weather?

The action has to be taken

now. We have to tell Canada and Canada has to tell the world. How do we do it? What has to be done?

I asked Mrs. Webster what she felt must be done to save what remains of the Biafran people. Her answers were to the point.

We must recognize Biafra as an independent state. The Biafrans have felt deserted by the western world. They've always had great respect for the United States and its principles of democracy and freedom. They have learned much from that country and have had great respect for its close neighbour Canada. Canada, with its respect and good will for other peoples.

But these two countries have not raised a single plea for an end to the useless killing and despoiling of an entire population. For it is without any qualification, "a war of genocide." Why haven't we done anything to stop it? Why? Maybe we aren't as interested in the equality of man as we like to think. A "racists attitude" might suit us after all.

Hear them and help them

While we muddle around, the disappointed Biafrans have turned to the communists for aid. We have given them that wonderful alternative.

And Britain. The Biafrans regard Britain with dismay and regret. This once just country has sold to the enemies of Biafra the arms that are killing its men. We must put pressure on Britain to end this commercialization of death.

And food. We are continually talking about how we would like to help out. So why the hell don't we! We've got planes on hand, Hercules transports, that would be a gigantic boost to the efforts of the few organizations that are managing to get food into Biafra. I'm not speaking specifically of the Red Cross. It has done some good but is far from doing its best. One report stated that a Red Cross plane landed in Port Harcourt carrying Nigerian troops. It's not in the papers. It's just one of many stories that are carried back by volunteer workers such as those in CUSO.

All of these steps have to be taken if the people of Biafra are to survive. If we do not act now it will soon be too late to act and we will have condemned an entire segment of the human race to oblivion.

We ourselves can't take the steps just on our own initiative. We must tell those who can, our government, to take the steps. And how do we tell them?

Mrs. Webster wants us to set up a forum at York. To bring in the people who have been in Biafra and Nigeria, the people who know the truth. Let's bring in these people; let's hear them and let's help them.

