

# *Remembrance*

## *African Activist Archive Project*

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### **Nigeria/Biafra Negotiations During World Council of Churches Gathering**

#### **A Personal Remembrance**

**By Robert E. Maurer**

On July 11, 1968, there were active negotiations going on between Nigerian and Biafran representatives in, of all places, Uppsala, Sweden. According to a source (named below) on location with direct knowledge, these were the only negotiations going on between the two parties anywhere in the world at the time.

Uppsala was the site of the Fourth Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC). (Gathering every seven years, the Assembly was the highest WCC policy-making body.) One of the seven WCC presidents was Akanu Ibiam (1906 - 1995), a doctor. He had been governor of the Eastern Region of Nigeria, and later served as an advisor to Colonel Odumegwu Ojukwu, leader of what then was called "Biafra". Biafra had announced its intention to secede from Nigeria some 14 months prior to the WCC Assembly, setting off a civil war.

In the document "Nigeria/Biafra Relief" there are my hand-written references to "Ibyam" near the top of the page and, further down, to "Ibiam". I believe I knew at the time that Dr. Ibiam was one of the key negotiators. (There is another 20-page document in the collection, dated March, 1969, by the WCC's Division of Inter-church Aid which cites at length a 1967 letter to "Dr. Ibiam" from a WCC delegation attempting to visit him "in Biafra".)

What was my role in Uppsala, and what do my hand-written comments on the document reveal about the negotiations?

At age 26 I had been chosen, along with a few other American youth, to be a delegate to the Youth Participants' Assembly (some 125 delegates from throughout the Protestant world) held just prior to and during the WCC's Fourth Assembly, also in Uppsala. I was elected chairman of the Youths' Assembly by the delegates themselves, a high and totally unexpected honor, especially since Americans were not viewed very favorably in international forums during the height of the Vietnam war.

During its proceedings, which opened on July 1, 1968, a number of youth delegates wanted to take up a collection for Biafra. Aid to Biafrans was becoming not only a humanitarian issue at the time, but also a sensitive political one. Of course I saw nothing wrong with taking up a collection, until I was approached by (Episcopal) Bishop J. Brooke Mosley who was assigned by the Fourth Assembly to be its liaison to our Youth Assembly.

In confidence, Bishop Mosley told me about the high level Nigerian/Biafran negotiations then occurring in Uppsala. He said I was to tell no one. He also strongly suggested that the Youth Assembly neither debate nor approve any resolution calling for donations to Biafra unless the negotiations broke down. Such public support for one side would threaten the negotiations, he explained. In fact, even passing such a resolution might itself cause them to break off. I was also told that a very small group of WCC leaders knew about the negotiations, and that they were trying to avoid any biased statements during the public portions of the Fourth Assembly, especially as many people throughout the world were siding with Biafra.

I told Bishop Mosely that I was now under considerable pressure from the Youth Assembly to allow a “donations resolution” to be voted upon (which would have probably passed unanimously), and that we needed to keep in close contact so that, should the negotiations break off of their own accord, I could quickly allow the donations' vote. He agreed. (I came to have subsequent civil rights and church issues “business” with Bishop Mosely, especially in his role as Bishop of Delaware. I came to respect him enormously. He was a gentleman, always keeping his word, able to move with grace, successfully advocating liberal solutions in a highly conservative Episcopal hierarchy.)

The hand-written note at the bottom of the document is from Bishop Mosely. It answered my hand-written note at the top of the page concerning when “Ibyam” was going to give a press conference. (We were actually sitting in a large arena distant from one another, with a colleague walking the document on which we wrote notes back and forth between us.) There was my “time stamp” at the bottom of page 1: “5pm”: the time of Bishop Mosley's answer on July 11th. He said Ibiyam was not “prepared at this time” to give a press conference - “... meanwhile he [Ibiyam] is engaged in conversations with his brothers of Nigeria, 'in depth' ...”

On the 2nd page, there is my hand-written time-stamp “5:45pm”. Bishop Mosely and I were both attending a plenary session of the Fourth Assembly. In my handwriting, there is reference to “Q. Nigerian”. A Nigerian delegate was recognized, and he asked if the WCC was working with the Christian Council of Nigeria? I can not say at this distance in time why it was an explosive question to ask, but it was. Then there is my hand-written entry: “Q. McGovern”. This refers to Senator George McGovern who was a delegate representing the United Methodist Church. As a point of information he raised that there was a “transport problem” (almost surely referring to relief aid for Biafra whose transit was being blocked by the Nigerian government). My guess from this distance is that Senator McGovern knew of the negotiations, and was trying to restore the “rhetorical balance” between Nigeria and Biafra because the prior speaker had tilted it toward Nigeria.

“A Payne” in the hand-written entry is Dr. E.A. Payne who was the chairman of the Fourth Assembly, and, I assume, chairing this plenary session. He thanked the last speaker (McGovern?) but cautioned (I believe) everyone not to continue to speak on this complicated matter, and that it will be taken up later. At some point Dr. Ibiam rose to state that Nigeria was the aggressor, mentioning bombing and starvation. And then, at “9:30pm” that evening, Chairman Payne again tried to bring balance to the atmosphere, by stating that Dr. Ibiam was on one side, but that Dr. Payne knew how Nigerians felt, too. I also note that “Blake” (Dr. Eugene Carson Blake, WCC General Secretary) thought a settlement near.

The document itself, from the WCC's Division of Inter-church Aid, Refugee and World Service, is also very interesting from the point of view of “balance” between Biafran and Nigerian relief efforts. It would have been issued on (or probably before) July 11, 1968.

I can not recall how I kept delaying a “donations” discussion and vote during the Youth Assembly. It met from July 1st to 3rd in what was called the “pre-Assembly”, and then continued to meet during the WCC’s Assembly (July 4 – 20.) I do recall, however, that I was finally informed that the Nigerian/Biafra negotiations had broken down. I then allowed the Youth Assembly to discuss and vote to set up a collection point for cash donations.

BISHOP MOSLEY -  
Will IBYAM GIVE A PRESS CONFERENCE?  
When?

WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES  
FOURTH ASSEMBLY  
UPPSALA, JULY NO. 27

Bob Maurer

July 11, 1968  
Thursday

NIGERIA/BIAFRA RELIEF

Report of actions taken through

the Division of Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service

1. Since the outbreak of this emergency, many WCC member Churches and their service agencies have responded to the appeal made by the Division to undergird the local churches in their relief activities for the distressed on both sides.
2. The Divisional Committee of DICARWS, at its meeting in November 1967, appealed to its constituencies for \$250,000 to assist relief programmes in both Nigeria and Biafra. This appeal was doubled at the March meeting and then raised to \$800,000 at its meeting in Geneva last month.
3. On June 30th, 1968, the response to the Division's appeal had reached \$338,818 in cash actually received, and a further \$151,883 had been pledged or promised. Since then, a number of additional large pledges have been announced and these amount to approximately \$200,000.
4. In addition to this cash response, some Inter-Church Aid agencies have made substantial supplies of material aid available. This has included large quantities of powdered milk, powdered eggs, baby foods, stockfish and medical supplies. The total value of this material aid is estimated at more than \$3,000,000.
5. In October, 1967 the Division made available \$5,000 in cash to the Christian Council of Nigeria (CCN) so that its newly formed Emergency Relief Committee could begin operations. Subsequently, a total of \$65,000 has been sent to the CCN for it to continue its programme for war victims. During this period, church agencies related to the Division have made available to the CCN medical supplies valued at \$350,000 and 8 tons of powdered milk.
6. The Division arranged in October 1967 for 766 kilos of medical supplies to be sent by air to Cameroon from where they were forwarded to Biafra before the frontier was closed. In November 1967 the Division made available to the International Committee of the Red Cross \$20,000 for the chartering of the first aircraft to take medical supplies and Red Cross workers to Biafra.

5 p.m.

I announced at Press Conf. today  
that Ibiyam is not prepared at this  
time to give a press conference <sup>meanwhile,</sup> - he  
is engaged in conversations with his  
brothers of Nigeria, "in depth". Tomorrow  
the press conf. will feature a presentation on  
"WCC Relief to Nigeria + Biafra", led by  
Bunyan Can, Jean Fischer, + Alan Booth. WCC

(over)

5:45 p.m. Q. Nigerian: Is he [wee] working thru the Nigerian Xian Council of Nigeria?

Q. McGovern: transport problem - tells us as a pt. of info.  
A. Payne: thank you but to speak on this while complicated things - NO - you'll hear later

Q. Ibian: Nigeria is the aggressor

7. The Division has to date sent six charter flights which have transported medical supplies and protein food, totalling some 60 tons, to Biafra. Two additional flights chartered by the Division have taken 35 tons of food, clothing and medicines to the island of Fernando Po. Some of these supplies have already been moved into Biafra.

*mentioned bombing, starvation, shelling*

8. At the request of the Christian Council of Nigeria, a medical relief team was recruited by the Division and sent to Lagos in June 1968. This team is now at work in the Ikot Ekpen area, ministering to a concentration of distressed people.

9:30 p.m. Payne: Ibiem is on one side. Wee does not want to pass judgment on either side - aware of us but Nigerians feel too.

9. In cooperation with the Norwegian Church Relief Committee, the Division has acquired 2,890 tons of stockfish, a high protein food which is an acceptable article of diet. The first ship left Norway in June with 500 tons of stockfish, 30 tons of baby food, clothing and medical supplies given by the Swedish ICA Committee, and 50 tons of powdered milk given by the Danish ICA organisation. This consignment was received by Pastor Berge, director of the Norwegian Church Relief Committee, representing the WCC in Fernando Po, where it is being stored for onward movement. A second ship left Norway on July 5 and is carrying 400 tons of stockfish which will be received and distributed by the Christian Council of Nigeria. A third ship is about to leave Norway with 500 tons of stockfish, 20 tons of medical supplies and 50 tons of baby food. It will call at Rotterdam to load up to 200 tons of additional relief supplies. Arrangements are being made to ship the remaining 1,400 tons of stockfish still in Norway.

*members of central comm. are to serve on the diaconate. Reminded that Blake*

10. For administrative expenses incurred by the relief committee of the Churches in Biafra for its work, the Division has transmitted to it \$16,800.

*hoped that a settlement may be reached.*

11. The Division of Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service, is continuing, and is trying to intensify as circumstances permit, its efforts to undergird the relief programmes of the churches in Nigeria and Biafra. Major contributions in cash and material aid so far have come from agencies in Germany, Great Britain, USA, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Switzerland, etc. The Division is cooperating with the International Committee of the Red Cross, Caritas Internationalis, Catholic Relief Services, and other voluntary agencies.

12. Throughout this Assembly, staff have met every day to carry on the services, consult with donor agencies and those responsible for the relief operations in the field and to plan for the future. From the first hours of these consultations, including conversations with Dr. Ibiem immediately after his arrival, the emphasis has been on meeting human need.

13. As a result, it is proposed to bring to the Assembly through the Committee on Inter-Church Aid, Refugee and World Service, recommendations for future programmes of relief and rehabilitation in Nigeria / Biafra which will call for approximately \$3,000,000 of new money to meet the needs of this massive emergency. Even so it is recognised that the situation is deteriorating so rapidly that it is beyond the capacity of voluntary agencies, separately or combined.