

IMPRESSIONS OF BIAFRA

Margot Parish *

IN April this year, the Britain-Biafra Association was invited by the Biafran Government to send three of its members to Biafra as guests of the Government and people. I was fortunate to be one of those delegates.

As we landed at Port Harcourt one of the first people I met was an Irish priest who complained bitterly at the behaviour of the BBC. He said the BBC had continually broadcast reports of the capture of the towns and villages by Nigerian troops, 'when we knew full well it was not true'. And this was the complaint of all the British people I met in Biafra.

We visited a refugee camp near Owerri and on the way our driver told us of the suffering of the people. 'There is not a family unaffected by this war. This is our war, we will never go back into Nigeria, we would all rather die than go back'. This was the story every single person told us.

Several of the refugees in this camp are refugees two or three times over—from Northern Nigeria to Nsukka, from Nsukka to Enugu, and then again from Enugu. They are becoming integrated with the local population who nourish and console them, while many of the men return to the villages from which they have fled, to become guerrillas.

We spent a whole afternoon at Aba General Hospital talking to wounded soldiers and civilians, many of them from minority areas. The hospital was crowded, patients lying on blankets on the floor, between and under the beds. Most of the work, apart from the nursing, is carried out by the voluntary labour of the local population. Here again the story was the same: 'We would rather die than go back into Nigeria'.

The morale of the soldiers was very high, all they wanted was to get back to the front. Even one young officer whose leg had been amputated assured me cheerfully that he was going back to command guerrillas. One young nurse from a minority area told me her people were fully behind Biafra and the war. 'We did have some disputes with the Ibos before the war, but now we are together in the war and we can sort out our differences afterwards'.

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We also visited the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Umuahia, which is not quite so overcrowded as Aba although it has double the number of patients than before the war. Many of the staff are British, working round the clock with their Biafran colleagues. I asked one young nurse from Liverpool, Sister Travis, if she did not want to go home. 'No', she said proudly, 'I consider it a privilege to be allowed to work among these people'. And I think that expressed the feeling of all the British staff.

We saw the relics of the Nigerian 2nd Division, destroyed at Abagana on the road from Enugu to Onitsha. A solid mile and a half of lorries and armoured cars, burnt out and exploded shells and cartridges—a mass of twisted and burnt metal. The destruction of this convoy was one of Biafra's greatest military victories. It was a sinister sight. On the doors of churches, Nigerians had chalked 'We come not to worship but destroy' and on a deserted palm wine shop they had written 'No more Biafra—One Nigeria'. We saw the first ever 'Made in Biafra' 120 millimetre mortar shell, and watched it fired at the retreating Nigerians six miles away.

We also saw the bomb damage at Aba where 38 people were killed in one raid. A market had been severely damaged but fortunately it was empty—the people were away on a 'combing' operation, searching the bush for Nigerian infiltrators. After bombing, the planes return and strafe the civilians with bullets. We saw buildings, cars and ambulances riddled with bullets from this strafing, and many civilians in hospital were wounded by the bullets.

We had an interview with Chief Bassey, Provincial Administrator of Annang, a minority area. He told us that the day before, (April 14) Nigerian troops had slaughtered 300 civilians in Abak Division, Annang. He also maintained that he had himself seen the markings on the plane 'RAF'.

There is no doubt that this war in Biafra has the overwhelming support of the people. There is no conscription, there is no war budget. When recruits are needed there is a recruiting campaign and it takes the police and military all their time to control the crowds of young men eager to enlist. There are many stories told of people trying to enlist. One young man was told by the Recruiting Officer 'But you are very young, have you asked your father's permission?' 'Don't be stupid,' came the prompt reply, 'do I have to ask my father's permission to defend my fatherland?'

Money for the war effort is raised in a similar manner. Just before we left, the women of Port Harcourt had raised £10,000 and

were discussing how to raise a further £10,000. Money is given as willingly as life itself in Biafra today.

We were travelling back from Aba to Port Harcourt when the news of Tanzania's recognition came through and in spite of the curfew and the blackout the people were dancing and singing on the streets and the one word we heard above all others was 'Biafra'.

We had a long interview with Dr. Azikiwe who told us a little of his visit to President Nyerere. Dr. Azikiwe was very confident that it was only a matter of time before other African states would recognise Biafra.

The highlight of our tour was a personal interview with the Head of State, Lt. Col. Ojukwu, who broke his week's retreat in order to see us before our return home. The atmosphere was informal and we asked our questions freely and were freely answered by this gentle, quiet-spoken man. He told us that the formation of the Britain-Biafra Association was to him a vindication of his innermost belief that in Britain there must be people who understand and sympathise with the justness of Biafra's cause. He went on to confirm the impression we had received that Biafra will never return to Nigeria. 'Unless, of course', he went on, 'there is no Biafran left alive. But as long as there is a single Biafran alive the question of reunification with Nigeria is gone, never to come back, we will never allow it'.

On the question of British policy, Ojukwu said, 'We find British policy, to say the least, bewildering'. But he felt that there was now in Britain a change taking place, and people were beginning to ask questions. 'It's a start', he said.

On the question of Tanzania's recognition of Biafra he said that 'it is the first time an African country has demonstrated its independence'. He went on to say that the effect of this would grow with time, and that as a result of this bold step by Tanzania the question of Biafra and Nigeria 'has ceased to be an internal problem of Nigeria'.

When asked about the effect of the blockade and the war itself on Biafra's economy, Ojukwu said: 'In modern terms one sees that since the blockade there has been no economy. That is in modern terms. But when you look in basic terms you will find that the blockade has not really had a very great effect in that Biafra's economic potential is essentially what is innate in Biafra, and this is still there'.

Asked whether he would consider anything like the agreement reached at Aburi in January 1967, Ojukwu replied. 'Not now, not

now. There will be aspects of it on the economic side of course, yes, but not on the question of political sovereignty.'

Commenting on the war itself, he said: 'We are supremely confident that we have already gone over the hump, that right now we are, as it were, leading down to victory. Victory for us is a simple thing—prevent ourselves being annihilated, stop. Not to conquer anybody; and this is why I've always maintained Lagos can never win, because theirs must be total victory, conquest. Ours—every day we prevent ourselves being over-run and massacred, that day we chalk up as being a victorious day'.

We came away from Biafra confident that Biafra is here to stay, and that our main task is to put pressure on the British Government to cease its supply of arms to Nigeria as the greatest contribution we can make to bringing the slaughter to an end.
