

Chapter 11

Earthquake, Wind and Fire

On 29 February 1960, the worst earthquake ever recorded on the African continent struck the city of Agadir on the Moroccan coast. There were two shocks, followed by a tidal wave. More than three-quarters of the city was reduced to rubble, and fire consumed most of the rest. Nearly one-third of the city's 45,000 people were thought to have perished, and the rest were left homeless and traumatized. Unicef was one among the many international organizations which immediately sent in relief supplies, adding its cargoes to the melée of tents, blankets, food and other supplies pouring in on behalf of the stricken population.

The earthquake at Agadir was only one of many disasters in various parts of the world in which Unicef continued to act in its original, emergency-relief capacity. During and after the postwar recovery period in Europe, there were the refugee crises in the Indian subcontinent and in the Middle East, earthquakes in Ecuador and Greece, wars in Korea and Vietnam, and the Hungarian uprising; in all of these situations Unicef helped care for children and mothers, often delivering its relief supplies through the local Red Cross or Red Crescent Society.

As the postwar period gave way to the era of development, Unicef became disenchanted with the role of instant saviour and band-aid supplier. After 1950, when directed by the UN General Assembly to concentrate on longer-term problems of children in the underdeveloped parts of the world, there was a purposeful withdrawal from the emergency role. In 1953, the word 'Emergency' was dropped from the organization's title. At the beginning of the 1950s emergency relief constituted eighty-five per cent of goods sent overseas; by the end of the decade, the proportion declined to an average of only seven per cent per year.

The earthquake at Agadir was particularly calamitous in the size of the shock, and the scale on which it shattered lives, homes and property. In its aftermath, international relief poured into the stricken area. Mobilized at short notice, without the benefit of proper assessments of needs and local conditions, an inevitable proportion of what was sent was questionably useful, became jammed in the overflowing relief pipeline, went unaccounted for, or duplicated what had been sent from elsewhere. The disorganization on the ground was relayed to the rest of the world via the international

news media whose ubiquitous presence at major disaster scenes was becoming an integral part of the world's response. The publicity surrounding relief at Agadir attracted some notoriety to the international organizations involved. Within Unicef it provoked a debate on what the contemporary role in disasters ought to be.

As in many other organizations whose mainspring was humanitarian relief but which were now caught up with the challenge of development, the discussions reflected a common perception: that disaster relief and development co-operation were two quite different kinds of activity. A relief operation assuaged the distress caused by something unusual and devastating happening to a large number of people, until circumstances returned to normal and their lives could pick up from where they left off. The purpose of development co-operation, while it might also have the short-term effect of relieving distress, aimed to do the very opposite of leaving people in a position to lead the same lives they had previously led; it was intended to transform the circumstances of their lives into something permanently better. The difference between the two was the difference between charitable hand-outs and investment; and those humanitarian organizations whose purpose was not explicitly confined to emergency relief had spent the past decade working out that, as far as underdeveloped countries were concerned, investment was the more attractive proposition. Expenditures on instant succour vanished into a bottomless pit; and they deflected scarce resources away from tasks such as building up permanent maternal- and child-health networks, and attacking disease and malnutrition.

This viewpoint was encapsulated by the often-repeated Chinese proverb: 'Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach him to fish and you feed him for life'. In March 1960, the Swedish delegation tentatively suggested to the Unicef Executive Board, meeting a month after the earthquake at Agadir, that Unicef had acted over-hastily in its anxiety to arrive swiftly on the scene, and might do well in the future to leave emergencies to others. But this idea provoked considerable opposition. However tidy their logic, the fact was then, and has remained since, that a retreat from disaster relief as a matter of policy was neither desirable nor practicable.

Any disaster—particularly the sudden calamity, but also the slow creeping kind whose demands may last months or even years—requires the mobilization of different skills and competences, often at very short notice. It would be impossible to find in any organization the full range of expertise required; and wasteful to try and create such an organization and keep it on permanent stand-by. Unicef had special organizational qualities and experiences to offer for disaster-relief operations. It had a record of offering relief to mothers and children on both sides of an armed conflict; its network of programme staff based in the field were in a position to signal the need for emergency aid for the victims of obscure disasters—an epidemic in the Maldives Islands, a landslide in the Andes Mountains, a

cyclone in Mauritius. Its well-oiled supplies machinery, with stockpiles of goods already to hand in New York, Copenhagen, and other places where regular programmes were already underway, could be mobilized at a moment's notice.

At least as important a reason for continuing to be active in disaster relief was organizational credibility. Unicef's role in emergencies was important not only for the victims, but for the way the organization was perceived by many of its supporters, particularly the private individuals who gave generously to relieve suffering through the fund-raising drives of national committees. An international organization established to help mothers and children in distress could not stand aloof from the victims of a catastrophic earthquake or cyclonic tidal wave. In the television era, when it was becoming commonplace for film footage of disaster victims in distant lands to be beamed into living rooms all over the Western world, it was impossible for an organization such as Unicef to sustain its image and public reputation if it did not appear to be active at the moment when the sufferings of those it existed to help were bathed in the glare of publicity.

The sympathy and generosity of ordinary citizens, and the pressure they exerted directly or indirectly on their governments, were given new force by the media revolution; television itself became part of the dynamics of disaster relief. This was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, it meant that Unicef national committees and other nongovernmental organizations were able to focus attention on suffering in the developing world with an ease normally denied them; in their capacity as angels of mercy they were themselves a part of the news event. The disaster represented a rare opportunity to capitalize on public concern for children, latent under ordinary circumstances, as well as raise funds on their behalf.

The less fortunate side of all the attention was that it also turned the spotlight onto the efforts of the authorities on the scene of the disaster, and on their partners—the humanitarian aid organizations—just at the moment when they were jointly struggling hardest to mount programmes of assistance in the most adverse of circumstances. For a high proportion of the public in the West, the time of a disaster was almost the only time their attention was concentrated on the people of the Third World, or on their governments. What they saw in the brief span of time in which their own and the media's attention were engaged was actually the conditions of life and absence of administrative capacity in an underdeveloped society, suddenly illuminated by a sensational and cataclysmic event. The picture they received was, therefore, full of overly bright patches and empty spaces, and often thoroughly distorted.

An earthquake, cyclone, hurricane, even a drought, may strike a population in North America or Europe as devastatingly as that of an underdeveloped society. But sophisticated networks of roads, communications, security systems, health facilities, public works, and the greater

resources of those affected, help to absorb the blow. Once food and water have been assured, the homeless given temporary shelter, the hospitals' emergency services mobilized, and the debris cleared away—all actions normally well within the capacity of local resources and management—the community can bathe its wounds and return to the regular routine of daily living. Not in a poor and underdeveloped society. The word 'underdeveloped' describes social and economic conditions in which, by definition, there are neither resources nor capacity to cope with a major disaster, and in which the victims' return to regular daily living may mean a return to a less spectacular, but scarcely less devastating, condition of misery and destitution.

In the nature of things, disasters always do most damage among the least well-off. Those who live on the poorest agricultural land, semi-arid stretches where no modernized farming enterprise would bother to venture, suffer hunger first in a drought. The oldest and most ramshackle dwellings collapse first in an earthquake or hurricane. The flood does not reach the better-off because they live on the higher ground. The poor are almost always, therefore, the worst affected victims of any disaster—in the Third World or elsewhere. In the Third World, they are also, by definition, the most difficult to reach. Whether the disaster is of the creeping kind, such as a drought leading to a famine, or the sudden kind, such as an earthquake or a cyclone, the burden of relief distribution falls on the local authorities. The poorer the area affected, the fewer are the means—in goods, in communications, in transport, and in personnel—at the authorities' disposal, and the weaker is their capacity to organize relief. They may not have the port or airport facilities, road networks or personnel to handle a deluge of assistance, however much needed and imploringly sought.

External assistance can fill the supply pipeline, provide trucks, supplement personnel with experienced logistics, health and communications experts. But except in the world's remotest areas, where there is still no more than a semblance of an administrative structure or in areas of conflict where effective administration has broken down, external assistance cannot substitute for local effort. It can only supplement. Its efficacy depends on the existing or expanded mobilization of internal resources, including the army, police, church and voluntary organizations, hospital and medical services, as well as the civilian administration. The fact is obvious. But it is almost always omitted from the descriptions of Third World disaster-relief operations offered to the public in the Western world. And because the public's views of places and peoples unfamiliar to them are principally informed by the oversimplified presentations on the television news programmes, the obvious is obscured.

In the case of the sudden calamity, when an entire population is plunged into trauma, left homeless, foodless, waterless, and prey to exposure and epidemic, the need for rescue teams and emergency supplies is most acute

in the first twenty-four to forty-eight hours. Few international organizations are able to arrive on the scene and distribute relief within that period. In almost every case, they raise funds and despatch goods of which the overwhelming majority are actually distributed in the post-disaster, or rehabilitation, phase. In the case of a disaster where the victims had almost nothing before it occurred, this can offer an opportunity to set up housing, health services and public works which do not simply re-institute the miserable standards of living people knew before, but introduce some permanent improvement. The impact of the disaster often shocks an administrative structure into existence, or expands it, in ways that make development more possible thereafter.

In the case of a creeping disaster, such as a drought, a high proportion of the assistance sent is similarly allocated not to the immediate saving of lives, but to nutrition, water or health-care schemes almost indistinguishable from those which, in another area of the country not suffering from drought, would be described in quite different terms. Here is where relief and development purposes fuse. Whatever the theoretical tug of war between the two; whatever the curious dichotomy which places one in the forefront of public attention and the other in its nethermost recesses, they belong on the same continuum.

During the 1960s, views within Unicef continued to ebb and flow about the right degree of involvement in disaster relief. In a modest way, Unicef responded to many of the major emergencies of the first years of the decade: the 1960–62 Congo crisis; the earthquake at Skopje in Yugoslavia in 1963; the continuing war in Algeria and Vietnam, as well as to crises of lesser magnitude. As time went on, the sharp edges of the dichotomy between disaster relief and development co-operation began to blur. By the middle of the decade, implicitly if not explicitly, most of Unicef's aid for emergencies was being directed not to relieving immediate distress but to post-disaster rehabilitation which chimed in more fittingly with the emphasis on development co-operation. A reserve fund of \$100,000 existed for the Executive Director to use for disaster relief at his discretion, allowing for a sudden airlift of cholera vaccines or high-protein food supplements. But the mood generally was one of reluctance to let emergencies divert organizational energies and resources away from the longer-term task to which Unicef now attached overriding priority.

No-one could have foreseen that events of the late 1960s, followed by others in the 1970s and beyond, would wreak havoc on this careful balance of priorities.

In 1965, India suffered a failure of the monsoon rains. The drought, one of the worst of the century, covered a large belt of central and southern India. Crop damage was extensive and, by early 1966, there was widespread food

scarcity. The national harvest shortfall was estimated at twenty million tons.

This food emergency came during an acutely difficult period for India. In 1964, shattered by the war with China, Jawaharlal Nehru, India's only Prime Minister since Independence, died. His passing marked the end of an era. Then, in 1965, war erupted with Pakistan. Beset by political and economic uncertainties, alarmed by the high rate of population growth and low rate of food production, India in the second half of the 1960s was in a period of deeper crisis than she had known since Independence. The new Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, had based her political platform on the conquest of poverty, and the food emergency brought on by the failure of the rains represented a major setback. India has well-developed procedures for dealing with situations of food shortage and famine; but it took time for the Government to assess the state of grain stocks, calculate the needs and plan the necessary logistics for the wide-scale relief programmes required. Not until its own machinery was in position was it ready to respond to offers of outside assistance. Gradually, the elements were manoeuvred into place, but not before a clamour about 'famine' and the slow pace of the Indian response had begun to reach the outside world. The raw nerve of Indian national pride was touched.

The condition of children in an area suffering from food shortage is the barometer of its severity. Their bodies indicate long before those of adults the absence of certain kinds of nutrients, and the debility which makes them vulnerable to coughs, fevers and diarrhoeal infections. Through its network of field staff—and, in turn, their relationships with officials in district administrations and with church and other voluntary organizations active on the ground—Unicef was independently aware of the deterioration of children's health in certain States, and did its best to impress upon federal government officials and upon its partners in the international community how serious it believed the situation to be. It also diverted to drought-stricken areas stocks of dried milk powder and medical supplies which had already been provided within its regular programme of support.

By the early part of 1966 the situation appeared to be reasonably in hand. The US government had shipped eight million tons of wheat to help make up the harvest shortfall. Many other countries had responded with bilateral offers of aid, as had UN and voluntary organizations, including many Freedom from Hunger committees, Catholic Relief services, Oxfam, the Friends, Lutheran World Relief and many others. Unicef national committees in the Netherlands, Switzerland and Sweden were raising funds for nutrition projects.

In 1966, the monsoon failed again. Two successive years of drought was highly unusual and potentially disastrous. This time the drought was less widespread, but particularly intense in the two north-eastern States of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, of which Bihar was the most vulnerable. Bihar

was one of the poorest and most densely populated States in India. Nine-tenths of the fifty-three million inhabitants lived entirely from the land, and more than a quarter were the families of landless labourers—people with few reserves of any kind. Even in a normal year Bihar suffered from food shortage. Only a very small proportion of the land was irrigated and therefore unaffected by a poor monsoon. All the preconditions for a catastrophe were present.

From June onwards, when the rains should have come, a relentless sun beat down. In August, the North Bihar plains were hit with heavy floods, washing out the newly-planted seed. Meanwhile, miles upon miles of rice paddies in the south which should have been green were parched and bare. When no rain fell in September, famine began to threaten. The autumn crop produced only a quarter of its usual harvest, and in some districts it produced next to nothing. Because of the drought the previous year, there was no grain, either to eat or to sow: all had already been consumed.

The impact of any drought on agricultural production, food stocks, grain prices; the levels of water in rivers, ponds and wells; the condition of livestock; and the physical health of human beings—all these build slowly by imperceptible degrees over many weeks, months, sometimes even years. Its effects vary from place to place within the drought-stricken area, and from one population group to another. People have different degrees of economic resilience to gradually rising prices, depending on whether they have reserves of some kind: land, valuables, sources of income from elsewhere. At any given moment in the process of gradual deterioration towards the kind of widespread hunger, whose gaunt and terrible images are evoked by the word 'famine', opinions differ about the severity of what is going on, how many people it is affecting, and whether the situation warrants a red alert, orange alert, or is merely a false alarm. At such times, those trying to signal a red alert—which often include the representatives of aid organizations, as well as many local officials, health and other personnel—may find themselves walking a tight-rope if there is official resistance towards the idea that uncontrolled 'famine' is stalking the land. If the representatives of international humanitarian effort push too hard, they risk alienating the government at whose pleasure they operate, and thereby curtail their chance of helping the victims. If they stand back, keep silent and wait for circumstances to alter in favour of a relief programme in which they can join, they risk the accusation of inaction from their donor constituency. Juggling these considerations is one of the most delicate problems facing any organization involved in disaster relief.

In the case of the Bihar famine, Indian sensitivities meant that there were delays and some foot-dragging. But ultimately they crumbled in the face of India's own instinct for self-exposure. Towards the end of 1966, an outcry began in the Indian press about the failure of the Bihar authorities to notice the plight of their countrymen. This outcry was taken up in the

international press. Thirty million of the poorest and most nutritionally-deprived people to exist anywhere in the world stared starvation in the face, and neither the Indian nor international officialdom appeared to be doing much to save them.

In November 1966, Prime Minister Gandhi turned the tide by touring famine-stricken Bihar and Uttar Pradesh to see the effects of the drought for herself. Now national pride was laid aside, and national and international relief began to flow to the stricken areas at a much faster pace. Unicef had already begun to make plans for a special emergency operation, taking on additional Indian staff and recruiting volunteers from Canada and the US. Before setting out on his own tour of the famine-stricken areas in November, Harry Labouisse visited Mrs Gandhi in New Delhi and committed Unicef to a programme of emergency assistance for six million children.

Mrs Gandhi asked Labouisse to avoid exaggerating the horrors of the situation in Unicef's fund-raising publicity, and not to reinforce the impression conveyed by some relief agencies that they alone had discovered the emergency and were the only people doing anything to alleviate it. Labouisse fully respected Mrs Gandhi's viewpoint. He understood how exasperating it was to countries whose moment of independence was still within recent memory to find themselves portrayed exclusively to outsiders in shocking, negative, poverty-stricken and helpless terms. It gave the false impression that their entire populations were on the brink of starvation, and that their own officials sat back, impotently wringing their hands, while emissaries from other countries sorted out their problems. Labouisse was keenly aware that Unicef's potential for action depended on a co-operative relationship with the Indian Government. In this, as in other major disaster situations, it was a hallmark of his leadership that everything must be done to avoid public statements which could hamper Unicef's negotiating position—and therefore its chances of helping the victims—with the relevant authorities.

Although not known for their efficiency, the Bihar authorities, with support from New Delhi, had begun to take the relief situation in hand. Food, some of it from consignments sent during the previous year's drought, was being moved into Bihar from elsewhere in India. More was brought in from overseas: an armada of ships brought another six million tons of US wheat across the seas. The total volume of fourteen million tons in 1966 and 1967 constituted an unprecedented movement of food from one country to another. Public works programmes were mounted, in which food was used in lieu of wages for manual labour. Thousands of fair-price shops were set up, through which grain was distributed at subsidized prices to almost the entire population of Bihar. Free rations were given to the elderly and infirm.

The feeding programme for children in which Unicef was active was

primarily run by CARE, the American voluntary agency, through the State school system, and included rations for other siblings besides those formally registered at the schools. The US and Canadian Governments gave supplies of milk and high-protein foods. A new protein-rich mix, called CSM (corn-soy-milk, manufactured in the US), was one of the principal ingredients. A similar cereal mix using wheat, a high-protein Indian legume, powdered milk, and vitamins and minerals from Unicef was formulated by the Food Technology Institute in Mysore. The product's name, *bal ahar*, meant 'child's food' in Hindi. Fifty heavy-duty vehicles were redeployed by Unicef to distribute these foodstuffs and transport relief personnel, and 500 lightweight motor bicycles were provided to the Education Department for the use of school supervisors, now become school-feeding supervisors.

Every day, long lines of bony, dust-covered youngsters, each carrying a brass plate and a handful of dung or twigs for cooking fuel, would assemble in the school yards of drought-affected villages to receive a ladleful of gruel. This programme, whose outreach continued to spread throughout early 1967 into April and May as heat, dust and famine reached their peak, provided more than five million children in Bihar and one million in Uttar Pradesh with one good meal a day.

As the dry season came to its scheduled end, fears grew that with the rains would come epidemics. In a famine, disease threatens death more readily than hunger. Drugs, vaccines and multivitamins were despatched by Unicef in an effort to help prevent outbreaks of smallpox and cholera. As the drought deepened, wells and water sources dried up. The shortage of water became even more critical than the shortage of food.

Up to this time, Bihar had remained almost exclusively dependent for a water supply on the heavens and the River Ganges—sources which had proved very unreliable. There existed in Bihar a large underground reservoir of fresh water waiting to be tapped by the sinking of wells and boreholes. As part of the emergency programme, thousands of small mud-wells were dug, providing drinking water and irrigating small patches of land. Drilling rigs were brought in, some flown in by Unicef. Where digging and drilling could not penetrate hard rock below the surface, an elaborate system of transport by rail, road, bullock cart, and even human portage, brought drinking water to distant villages.

Although thousands of children died in Bihar over the course of 1966 and 1967, the famine relief effort staved off the threatened tragedy of millions of deaths from starvation and disease. It had another positive aspect: for the first time it brought home to much of Indian officialdom the full dimensions of child malnutrition and its connection to national development. Studies undertaken in the famine area showed how the constant presence of hunger, a by-product of poverty, had weakened the strength, vitality, resistance to disease and mental alertness of entire generations of Bihari villagers. The relief effort revealed in all its starkness the effect of

poor nutrition on children and nursing mothers, less spectacular in its death rate than a cholera outbreak, but nonetheless pernicious.

The cruel truth about the famine, according to a special report prepared at Mrs Gandhi's request, was that most of the children in Bihar were certain of one good meal a day for the first time in their lives. George Verghese, the Prime Minister's Information Advisor, wrote: 'In a "normal year", these people hover on the bread line. They are beyond the pale, nobody's concern, they starve. In a famine year, they eat. Their health is better and the children are gaining weight. For them this is a year of great blessing. This is the grim tragedy of the situation'.

There was more milk to drink in Bihar in 1967 than there had ever been before, or in the judgement of some, was likely ever to be again. Mineral and vitamin supplements had been consumed on an unprecedented scale. Vaccination against smallpox and cholera had reduced the incidence of these diseases to levels lower than before the famine. Whatever their initial resentment about the international spotlight cast on India's problems by the famine, the consciousness of senior government officials about the evils of child malnutrition was alerted. Many policies and programmes designed for its long-term alleviation were precipitated or stepped up. Verghese wrote: 'The famine has been a revelation, a trial, a shame; but also an opportunity and an awakening. It has transformed some of the inertia of the past into energy'.

One of the programmes to which the famine gave a boost was the applied nutrition programme which Unicef had been supporting since 1959. Since the days when Unicef officials had first waxed enthusiastic over fish ponds and fruit and vegetable gardens in Orissa State, this programme had expanded considerably. Charles Egger, who arrived in New Delhi to become the Regional Director in 1961, promoted it energetically at the central level; the success of the pilot programme and the attention it attracted from overseas caught the official imagination. In 1963, ambitious plans were set in motion to spread the programme progressively into other Indian States, and eventually into hundreds of thousands of villages throughout the country. By the end of that year small-scale farming on small plots had begun in 226 development blocks in twelve States. Many other international and bilateral aid organisations had become involved, including WHO, FAO, the Peace Corps, Freedom from Hunger Campaign committees, CARE, and the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations. By March 1966 Unicef had committed \$8.25 million to the programme nationwide. Its fame helped gain child nutrition a first-time entry in the country's Five Year Plan. In the fourth Plan, covering the period 1966–1970, the Ministries of Health and Food and Agriculture (incorporating Community Development) were slated to devote \$110 million to applied nutrition countrywide.

During the drought years of 1966 and 1967, applied nutrition projects were started as part of the emergency programme in the drought-affected

States. The water from the newly-dug wells and boreholes, while not large enough in volume for rice cultivation, could be used to water small vegetable plots and fruit orchards. This was a classic case of a developmental response to a disaster situation, a project with a longer-term and more enduring effect being set in place as a result of calamity. Many of the funds raised by Unicef's national committees found their way into seeds and hand tools, poultry incubators and fruit-tree nurseries, small-scale dairying and fishing equipment, intended to offer the families of India's poorest villages a nutritious food supplement for good times as well as bad.

A price was paid, however, for the haste with which applied nutrition programmes were extended. The urgency of the need encouraged the tendency, both in Unicef and among government officials, to overlook the fact that by no means all the experience so far was positive. In a special evaluation of the applied nutrition projects in various Indian States carried out in 1966, shortly before famine took hold of Bihar, James Hundley, an FAO/WHO/Unicef consultant, raised serious questions about the programme. Hundley feared that, as attention moved to new areas, the old projects might wither from lack of attention, resources and encouragement. He found little evidence that the effects of the programme had 'radiated' to neighbouring villages. He doubted whether the target of extending the programme to 1000 new blocks during the course of the next Five Year Plan was sensible without some radical revision of its methods and approaches. Hundley's prognostications were borne out by later events. But for the time being the impact of the famine temporarily forbade any delay.

Whatever the disappointments awaiting the outcome of some applied-nutrition schemes, the relief effort mounted during the Bihar famine had many positive sides. It showed the world that, with assistance, India could master the most serious consequences of natural calamity; and it fostered a commitment, particularly in India, to the conquest of hunger and malnutrition among children. It also helped to launch a massive effort to improve village water supplies and to lessen agricultural dependence on the vagaries of the weather.

The rains returned in 1968, and helped produce a bumper harvest. This was the first harvest in which the new hybrid seeds of the 'green revolution' helped to fill the national granary. Within a few years, India became a food-surplus instead of a food-deficit country, even though the twin problems of poverty and malnutrition remained. India has not since suffered a major famine, nor faced drought without sufficient grain in hand to avoid mass imports of food from elsewhere. The famine in Bihar provided a historical landmark. Although many people died, and most of them were children, in terms of what it might have been a great disaster was averted.

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The colonial powers' hasty scramble in the late 1950s to leave most of the continent of Africa to its own political devices left a legacy with many inbuilt flaws. Decolonization was a precondition of African progress. But after the first flush of excitement at the dawning of Independence, few of the new States were able to settle down to a smooth and uneventful passage. Their political and administrative apparel was ill-fitting, and poorly designed for the task of economic and social transformation. Invented in the West at a very different stage of national evolution, it quickly showed a tendency to gape at the seams. One of the countries whose seams were most conspicuous was the Federal Republic of Nigeria. By the historical accident of British rule over three distinct but geographically adjacent regions, Nigeria came to independence as one nation whose only political cement had been supplied by Imperial domination. In 1958, existing rivalries between the peoples of the different regions were compounded by the discovery of oil in the east, the country of the Ibo.

Soon after Independence in 1960, turmoil began to overtake the fledgling institutions of government. In January 1966, the army took over in a military coup, which brought to power a predominantly Ibo leadership. A backlash of violence and reprisals against the Ibo led to another military coup, which brought to power a 31-year-old Christian Northerner, General Yakubu Gowon. Violence continued while Gowon tried to create a new federal structure, and the Ibo people began to retreat, physically and psychologically, into their eastern heartland. In May 1967, the fragile cement of unity cracked. Colonel Odumegwa Ojukwu, Military Governor of the eastern region, announced its secession and the creation of an independent republic called Biafra. In July, the federal forces of General Gowon attacked.

The Nigerian civil war, a profoundly bitter and bloody struggle, lingered on for two-and-a-half years until January 1970. Not only did it put the old colonial boundaries inherited by Africa to one of their severest tests. It did as much to the agents of international humanitarianism in the postwar era.

From the perspective of the UN, the civil war in Nigeria was an internal conflict in which, by the terms of its charter, it had no right to meddle unless invited to intervene by the Federal Government. But if the UN must stand to one side, some of its more prominent member states, notably the ex-colonial powers of Britain, France and Portugal—the one country in Europe determined to cling to its African possessions—were far from disengaged. Britain throughout was a strong supporter of the Federal Government and, despite intense domestic controversy, remained its major arms supplier. France and Portugal recognized the claim of Ojukwu and his followers to separate independent status and provided them with arms. The secession provoked disunity within Africa as well as outside it. At stake was the ability of the largest independent country in Africa to resist the forces of disintegration—forces which, as the Congo crisis had shown,

were explosive elsewhere on the continent.

As the embattled eastern enclave shrank before the federal military advance during late 1967 and early 1968, and as Ojukwu appealed to the rest of the world for aid to the Biafran cause, humanitarian zeal was confronted with a series of dangerous political trip wires. This was a civil war whose bitterness was exacerbated by age-old regional tensions, and the unwillingness of either side to consider any compromise. The Nigerian Military Government, determined at all costs to salvage the nation's fragile political unity and to retain control over the lucrative eastern oilfields, instinctively distrusted the credentials of any rescue operation for 'Biafran' people. Gowon's government insisted that all aid to the victims of the civil war must be supplied to Nigerians, not to 'Biafrans'; meaning that there should be no relief pipeline into 'Biafra' outside the reach of federal control. This was unacceptable to Ojukwu, for whom sovereignty and recognition were vital issues, and who needed relief conduits for his arms supply. Encirclement and siege, with their corollary, the gradual starvation of a blockaded population, were weapons of war as old as warfare itself. The idea of a relief operation which parlayed its way through enemy lines to bring relief to innocent civilians had come of age only fifty years ago, during the first World War. In the historically, culturally and politically quite different circumstances of newly-independent Nigeria, the obstacles to a similar effort on the necessary scale turned out in the end to be insurmountable.

Unicef was legally as obligated as any other UN member organization to adhere to the principle of respect for sovereignty. This inhibited aid to any population group, including children, unless the recognized government of the country in question had issued an invitation. At the time of Unicef's creation, the founding fathers had insisted that no child should be seen as 'an enemy', disqualified from receiving Unicef aid; the critical phrase in the original resolution stated that assistance should be dispensed 'on the basis of need, without discrimination because of race, creed, nationality status or political belief'. By applying a certain elasticity of interpretation, Unicef had behaved for all practical purposes as if this clause, while not exempting it from the respect due to sovereignty, at least meant that it was not held up to quite the same rigorous standards of adherence as most other UN bodies. A record of working on both sides of armed civil conflict had been established since 1948 in China and the Middle East, and every time that the precedent was re-established it gained further *de facto* force.

The question of what actually constituted an 'invitation' to send in relief was left purposely vague; often Unicef simply manoeuvred to reach a tacit agreement that, while the invitation might never formally be issued, its lack of existence was not an impediment. In Nigeria, the question of whether the 'invitation' could be understood to extend to the population of secessionist Biafra was never satisfactorily resolved.

Towards the end of 1967, a few months after fighting began in July, came the first intimations of what was to follow, both in terms of food scarcity and of the problems any relief operation would confront. At that time, there were thought to be around twelve million people in the secessionist area, a rather higher number than usual because Ibo resident in other parts of the country had gone to their homeland to take refuge. In an area supporting more than its usual population, increasingly compressed by the federal advance, and blockaded by land and sea, supplies of food and medicine—specially the supply of protein foods such as fish and meat—began to come under serious strain. The International Committee of the Red Cross, the organization which has the longest tradition of acceptability as a neutral provider of humanitarian assistance in times of war, managed to bring in some medical relief supplies and a team of medical personnel.

Unicef asked the Red Cross to act as the channel into 'Biafra' for its own emergency supplies. Early in 1968, the ICRC, after many stops and starts, finally obtained the theoretical agreement of both sides to the provision of relief, an agreement which implicitly covered Unicef's participation. But it was many months before further negotiations actually permitted planes to fly in supplies from the island of Fernando Po in the Gulf of Guinea, and even then the federal authorities made it clear that the ICRC planes flew into rebel-held areas 'at their own risk'. On 21 May, the federal troops captured Port Harcourt and the airport where the relief planes had been landing. Permission to continue the flights was peremptorily withdrawn.

At this point, the surrender of the secessionist enclave appeared to be no more than weeks, or at most months, away. Enugu, its capital, and Port Harcourt, its vital link with the Gulf of Guinea and the outside world, were lost. Its area was significantly reduced. A series of peace negotiations began, mediated under the auspices of the British Commonwealth and the Organization of African Unity (OAU), while the federal forces remained poised for what looked like the final onslaught. The hope was that Ojukwu would withdraw the Biafran claim for sovereignty, thus avoiding the bloodshed and bitter legacy a federal conquest would entail. In the meantime, the federal blockade was strengthened. But the secessionists, both at the conference table and in the field of combat, continued to hold out. As the peace negotiations dragged on, the relief operation became a casualty. A few planes continued to land behind the lines. But the amounts they were able to bring in fell far short of requirements. Over the course of the summer, reports from relief personnel in the embattled enclave, reinforced by Ojukwu's pleas, described a sharply deteriorating food situation, widespread malnutrition among children, and sought the world's aid in relieving their plight. Accusations that the Federal Government was engaged in deliberate starvation of the Ibo people began to gain credence in the international press and the humanitarian community.

The success of the Biafran propaganda campaign in the West, a campaign

that General Gowon failed hopelessly to counter, caused tremendous damage to the prospects of mounting a relief operation which both sides could regard as neutral. Popular sentiment in Europe, particularly in Britain where the Government faced widespread opposition to its pro-federal policy, rallied to the Ibo side. In mid-June, Leslie Kirkley, Director of the British voluntary agency Oxfam, spent a week in rebel-held territory touring villages and hospitals. Oxfam did its best to publicize the widespread child malnutrition he witnessed, the absence of food and medical supplies, and his prognostication of two million starvation deaths by September.

By early July 1968, the lack of an adequate relief operation was causing an international outcry. Passions ran extremely high, and mostly in favour of the Biafran cause. It was as if the predicament of the children in the seceded area conferred a moral superiority on their leaders. Sympathy with the plight of the Ibo was accompanied by the muddled assumption that those who were backing the unity of Nigeria accepted the starvation in the eastern enclave with indifference. The federal authorities were unfairly seen as exclusively to blame. In their view, the secession of would-be Biafra was the cause of the suffering, and the rebels led by Ojukwu were its perpetrators; the dying would end when the secession ended. Their position was backed at the international level by the OAU, whose position in turn was backed by the UN General Assembly. They therefore found the lack of neutrality among the would-be benefactors of these rebels quite incomprehensible.

In an atmosphere resounding with mistrust and ill-feeling, the ICRC's negotiations for a major relief effort became mired. The Federal Government declared itself willing to accept such an operation under ICRC auspices, if mounted through channels they controlled. These did not include an unsupervised airlift directly into secessionist territory from the Portuguese island of Sao Tomé and the Spanish-controlled Fernando Po. Portugal was a main shipper of arms to Ojukwu's forces, and Sao Tomé was known to be a principal route. The rebels, in turn, were not prepared to accept the loss of sovereignty implicit in a relief effort policed by the federal army. For two months, against the backdrop of the foundering peace negotiations first in Niamey, and later at the OAU in Addis Ababa, the ICRC tried unsuccessfully to convince both sides that, under its auspices, a relief operation for sick and hungry civilians could be carried out that would in no way promote the military fortunes of the other.

Unicef's Regional Headquarters for Africa happened to be located in Lagos. At this time, the Regional Director Dr Vedast Kyaruzi was a Tanzanian, and as Tanzania was one of the few African countries to recognize 'Biafra', Kyaruzi's personal position with the federal authorities was somewhat delicate. His deputy was Poul Larsen, a Dane and a long-time Unicef career officer, who therefore bore the brunt of the difficulties Unicef had to shoulder in Lagos on a day-to-day basis throughout the civil

war. Before the international furore gained its full momentum, the Unicef Executive Board had carefully negotiated its way through a discussion on the Nigerian conflict at its session in mid-June 1968. Kyaruzi, who had attended in person, called guardedly for urgent relief. The utmost brevity and propriety was maintained in the language of discussion: this was a period of intense conflict in Vietnam, and Board members were becoming well versed in the niceties of talking about relief for children in highly sensitive situations.

The needs of those on both sides of the conflict, the needs of 'all Nigerian children', were given proportionately equal attention. Every possible nuance that could in any way indicate that Unicef had a viewpoint sympathetic to the rebels' cause was studiously avoided. The policy remained that all Unicef relief supplies for the emergency should be channelled through the ICRC. In spite of the problems the ICRC was confronting in getting any relief into the enclave, the best course was to hope that these would eventually be resolved, and to pretend that the agreement in principle they had reached with the opposing sides six months ago was still in force. Altogether, \$400,000 was agreed by the Board as the sum that the Executive Director could use immediately at his discretion, with the understanding that more could follow when developments allowed.

When the storm broke in the international press, every party to the relief effort found itself buffeted in many directions. On the one hand, the public exposure of the threat to millions of children's lives was a tremendous advantage: it put pressure on the combatants to agree to the relief operation or face condemnation by world opinion. It also put pressure on the ICRC to throw more effort into the negotiations. On the other hand, given the popular bias towards one side, it sharpened the sensitivities that were already making it so difficult to mount full-scale relief.

UN Secretary-General U Thant now became involved. The United Nations, which had simply reiterated the OAU line up to this point, might not be able to take a stand on one side or the other of a civil conflict, but it could not hold up its humanitarian head if it took no stand on behalf of millions of children dying of starvation. At a meeting in Geneva, U Thant suggested to the heads of concerned UN member organizations that the organizations should assist where they could, but not without an invitation from the federal authorities. With the Nigerians poised on the brink of military victory, fearful of a UN intervention such as that undertaken in the Congo, such an invitation was hardly to be expected. Harry Labouisse told the Secretary-General that he did not consider that Unicef needed a specific invitation under its established mandate. Moreover, he felt that technically Unicef already had an invitation through the ICRC negotiations—assuming they were successful. As far as rebel-held territory was concerned, Unicef was the only card the UN had to play. Labouisse also

informed the Secretary-General that he was shortly to undertake a personal mission to Lagos to help bolster both the ICRC negotiations and the arrangements for bringing in Unicef supplies. He was asked if he would be willing to act as the representative of the Secretary-General; but he felt that he should confine himself to representing Unicef given the sensitivities of the situation.

As time went by and still almost no relief went in, public pressure on the relief organizations to save the 'Biafran' babies became acute. Comparisons with Hitler's concentration camps and accusations about genocide were frequently voiced. For those private voluntary agencies for whom carefully worded expressions of neutrality were so much foot dragging and red tape, the need and the desire to act became overwhelming. They announced their intention of dropping relief supplies by parachute into Biafra independently of the ICRC and in spite of the lack of permission from the Nigerian authorities. Such actions, the authorities retaliated, would constitute a violation of Nigerian airspace, and would therefore be regarded as hostile. Statements, evasions and accusations unfolded along with events on an hour-by-hour, day-to-day basis in the full glare of worldwide publicity. Newspaper photographs of gaunt bodies and glazed expressions, photographs which established in the contemporary mind a Richter scale of mass-child emergency, fueled the war of words and passions.

Labouisse kept Unicef's name as far away as possible from the chorus of declamations. He believed that even a remote association of Unicef's name with the cause of 'Biafra' could prejudice Unicef's ability to provide assistance to all the children in need. This injunction to discretion was extremely difficult to observe given the fever pitch of press interest; and it was particularly frustrating for the Unicef national committees whose artery of support was the public now clamouring for action on an almost unprecedented scale.

In mid-July, Labouisse made a public appeal on behalf of Unicef for funds for emergency assistance for children and their mothers 'on both sides of the conflict'. A few days later, he left for Lagos accompanied by two aides. Simultaneously, the ICRC appointed as their Commissioner for Nigerian Relief Auguste Lindt, a long-time friend to Unicef and an ex-Chairman of the Executive Board, currently the Swiss Ambassador to Moscow.

While Labouisse was engaged in the critical process of diplomacy in Lagos, Charles Egger, recently arrived from India to take up the post of Deputy Executive Director for Programmes, went to Geneva to lend his weight, his experience and his Swiss nationality to the back-up for Lindt's ICRC mission. Gertrude Lutz, another Swiss national, was temporarily assigned to the ICRC as Unicef liaison officer. Willie Meyer, then serving as Unicef's representative in Dakar, Senegal, was sent to Fernando Po to try and get into the disputed territory. An extremely sick man with only

weeks left to live, Meyer showed great fortitude in entering the rebel enclave twice to obtain an assessment of needs from on the ground. Dick Heyward in New York, surrounded by a team which included Sasha Bacic, Head of African programmes, and Ed Bridgewater, Chief of Supply Operations, pursued as clear-headedly as possible every source of funds and food they could think of. They devised a plan for the delivery of vast quantities of milk, protein-rich foods, drugs, vitamins and medical supplies over the coming months.

Calculating the size and content of the intended programme was a complicated business. Considerable movements of population, both before and after the outbreak of hostilities, made it difficult to establish any accurate numbers. Assessments of the harvest in the combat area—normally fertile and food-rich land—were also a matter largely for conjecture. The best estimate Heyward could come up with was that 5.5 million children and mothers were either totally dependent on relief or needed food supplements. For children under four, 7000 tons of milk and cereal mixes would be needed monthly, and for older children and mothers, 25,000 tons monthly. The total amounted to 1000 tons daily for all combat areas. This compared with 8000 tons for the Berlin airlift, but the terrain was difficult and the landing and communications facilities minimal.

It was clear that, under the circumstances, food supplies of this order of magnitude could never be brought in by airlift. Ambassador Lindt's negotiations for opening up sea ports and land routes through the embattled terrain were vital. At the moment they were successful, ships with food in sufficient quantity must be waiting off the coast. Accordingly, Heyward and his team chartered a cargo vessel, loaded it with 5000 tons of US-donated milk powder and high-protein food, and sent it to an as yet undesignated destination in the Gulf of Guinea. This was the first of many major Unicef consignments to the area.

Labouisse spent five weeks altogether in Lagos, and his visit had a crucial impact on Unicef's relief programme and on subsequent relations with the federal authorities. He met with General Gowon, and was convinced by the sincerity of the General's concern for the Ibo mothers and children. On his side, Gowon appeared convinced by the exclusively humanitarian concern of Unicef and its lack of partiality to the 'Biafran' cause—an impartiality he was not prepared to credit to most of the other humanitarian organizations. Labouisse managed to obtain from Gowon a commitment that planes carrying supplies from Unicef would not be shot down by federal troops; neither would shipments be searched. But although Gowon's suggestions about how to arrange relief movements overland across the line of battle sounded eminently reasonable to Labouisse, the fact was that negotiations for opening up routes either by land or air were no nearer a breakthrough. Auguste Lindt, in an intense process of shuttle diplomacy between the two sides, found the ground constantly shifting.

Land routes, cargo inspections, demilitarized zones, the choice of airstrips, the nationality of security staff—every detail was a stumbling block which fluctuated along with the military situation. By the middle of August, when 10,000 tons of food was stockpiled off the Nigerian coast and relief officials in the combat areas were reporting mounting starvation, Lindt was in a state of extreme frustration.

The ICRC was now under increasing pressure, attacked in Nigeria for partiality to the rebels, and in the rest of the world for its failure to bring them aid. Increasingly anguished reports coming out from the rebel enclave in early August indicated a death rate running into thousands every day. Red Cross Societies in various countries threatened to dissociate themselves from the ICRC effort unless it could find some means of gaining access to the starving. Anti-aircraft fire from federal troops meant that only an occasional flight with a few tons of protein food a day were getting in, not the 200 tons estimated as the minimum needed. The voluntary organizations—including the World Council of Churches, Caritas International, Oxfam, and a Scandinavian church aid consortium—now decided to mount their own separate airlift. They recruited as their squadron leader Count Carl-Gustaf von Rosen, a Swedish commercial pilot who performed heroic feats of hazardous flying to break the Nigerian blockade. Their base was Sao Tomé, the Portuguese island, and in the interests of humanity they decided to turn a blind eye to arms consignments which sometimes accompanied their cargoes. By September, their ‘illegal’ airlift was well under way.

At Unicef headquarters a decision had to be made about where to offload the 5000 tons of US food now approaching Nigerian waters, in view of the failure to open the hoped-for land route into the enclave from Port Harcourt. Heyward decided to ignore the protocols of intergovernmental relations and instructed the ship to proceed to Sao Tomé and offload part of the cargo—2000 tons—for onward passage via the ‘illegal’ airlift, and then go on to Lagos with the rest. In the event, the federal authorities chose not to regard the decision as a breach of Unicef’s faith. This was partly because of the confidence in Unicef established by Labouisse in Lagos, partly because open contacts were maintained and frank information supplied to the Nigerian mission at the UN. Meanwhile, Auguste Lindt had decided that the ICRC must also begin its airlift into the beleaguered territory, notwithstanding the absence of an agreement signed by both sides.

In September, six ICRC planes were put into daily commission from Fernando Po. The federal authorities expressed their displeasure to both ICRC and Unicef. But the airplanes were not attacked. A total of over 3500 tons of supplies were taken in by the two airlifts during September. Flights could only be made at night, and landing conditions were primitive and hazardous. The supplies taken in amounted to a little more than half

the lowest estimate of need, but they did prevent the death rate from climbing and the condition of the children began to stabilize. During the next few months, the airlifts managed to take in provisions of a similar and sometimes higher order of magnitude. Unicef was a major supplier of both.

At the same time, supplies continued to be sent to Lagos for the relief of areas outside the embattled enclave. In the south and east, areas from which the rebels had retreated, suffering was almost as acute. While in Lagos in early August, Labouisse and one of his aides had toured these areas. They had been deeply struck by the pitiful conditions in mission hospitals and refugee camps. The terrain was riverine, and the destruction of many bridges had made the movement of people and goods along waterways and roads even more tortuous than usual. Unicef therefore based two helicopters at Calabar which operated from dawn to dusk, carrying by sling a ton of goods at a time, on short-haul runs to areas close to the front.

By October, Unicef had spent around \$1 million. Special appeals run by the national committees had raised \$1.5 million, half of this in the Netherlands. Food, drugs and other contributions in kind from governments and private industry amounted to \$10.6 million. However, as Labouisse pointed out to the Executive Board, any sense of achievement was dispelled by the reflection that all the combined efforts of the ICRC, church and voluntary organizations, and Unicef fell far short of meeting the needs. No comparable relief operation had ever had to be mounted independently of a government or governments mobilizing the resources of personnel and materiel which only they could command.

By now, it had also become apparent that Ojukwu and his followers, whatever their military prospects, were not willing to give up and would fight on to the end. Peace was many months away, and suffering and death were certain to continue even longer. Ambassador Lindt was still trying to find some way to remove the restrictions on relief that both sides were imposing. Labouisse invited governments to lend their weight to these diplomatic efforts, and to redouble their financial support.

Towards the end of the year, a major breakthrough was achieved. Unicef finally managed to impress upon the US State Department the stupendous costs of the relief operation, costs which the agencies could not cover indefinitely. Vice-President Hubert Humphrey took up the cause, and the US Government agreed to pay for the freight costs of food and medical supplies taken in by air from the offshore islands. Unicef and some of the agencies in the Joint Church Aid consortium could now claim reimbursement. This made a considerable difference to the financial security of the operation. It was also running more smoothly. Many of the organizations drew upon Unicef's capacity for supply procurement, and UNIPAC—the Unicef Procurement and Assembly Centre in Copenhagen—became the main purchasing and forwarding agency for both airlifts. In

January, the US Government provided eight additional cargo planes and, by the following April, the amount flown in had risen to 8000 tons a month. This kept on hold the nutritional state of the eight million people thought to be hemmed into the enclave.

Even though the amount of food and drugs carried in never reached the volume thought necessary, the grimmest prognostications about child deaths did not materialize. This was mainly due to the efforts of the head of Biafran paediatric services, Dr Aaron Ifekwunigwe. Force of circumstances inspired a superhuman response to the 1968 'epidemics' of child malnutrition. With the help of a Dutch nutritionist, Isabel Koeniggracht, and other local and foreign relief personnel, Ifekwunigwe managed to set up a special network of child-feeding stations in schools, church buildings and town halls at no more than two or three miles distance from one another. Since no particle of body-building food must be squandered, each child's nutritional condition was measured in order to select the neediest.

The system they used was crude but effective: they measured the children's upper arm circumference with what was known as a 'quac (Quaker Upper Arm Circumference) stick'. They dispensed rations of milk powder and CSM—corn-soy-milk—mixed with local produce: cassava, yam, bananas, and palm oil. They even ran an educational programme on nutrition for mothers and the guardians of the many thousands of children separated from their families by the turmoil of war. In mid-1969, Ifekwunigwe asked Unicef to develop a preparation that could be simply mixed with water and used to feed children with very advanced malnutrition. The result was K-Mix-2—based on casein, a milk derivative, skim milk, and sucrose. Once the worst was over, the patient could move onto a diet of CSM.

Ifekwunigwe's programme was one of the first instances where a child-nutrition programme in emergency circumstances was run on a truly scientific basis. Specific nutritional deficiencies were identified in the patients and treatment took account of local food habits. A distinction was made between the various stages of malnutrition and, according to the diagnosis, the child was hospitalized for feeding with K-Mix-2, treated as an out-patient with CSM, or enrolled at a programme in a school or health clinic where the mother received advice and supplementary rations. Immunization campaigns against smallpox, measles and tuberculosis were also organized, with vaccines supplied by Unicef. Thanks to Ifekwunigwe and his teams, the nutritional condition of the children in the enclave improved markedly during 1969. It was a prodigious achievement and many of its principles and practices, further refined, have since become the copybook format for child-feeding programmes in famine emergencies.

In mid-1969, the relief operation entered a new period of crisis. On 5 June an ICRC plane crossing the Nigerian coast just before dusk was shot down by a Nigerian fighter plane with the loss of four lives. ICRC flights

were suspended. The church airlift continued, but at a reduced level and under great strain. Ten days later, Auguste Lindt was unceremoniously declared *persona non grata* by the Nigerian authorities. He had carried out a difficult, dangerous and thankless task with poise and aplomb, but tensions between the ICRC and the federal authorities had been growing for some time. On 30 June, the representatives of foreign relief organizations in Lagos were summoned to meet the federal authorities, and instructed that in future all their assistance for civilian victims in war zones must be channelled through the Nigerian Rehabilitation Commission or the Nigerian Red Cross, not through the ICRC.

An immediate problem was to find alternative ways to the airlifts of moving supplies into the rebel-held area. In a state of high emotion, the ICRC declared itself determined to go on with its relief operation. Negotiations about river and land corridors, and an air corridor for use in daylight, began again. Again, they collapsed. By mid-July, reports from Biafran-held territory described sudden and massive deterioration in the children's condition. The UN Secretary-General appealed to the combatants to allow the flights to begin again, but his efforts were in vain. The ICRC airlift was over.

Quietly, Unicef and the other relief organizations, backed by Clyde Ferguson, the US Commissioner for Nigerian Relief, began building up the independent church airlift. Towards the end of 1969, the tonnages of food imported had risen close to previous levels. But after more than two years of warfare and siege, starvation was beginning to take hold in the rebel enclave. A relief survey mission sent in by the US Government in October reported that the population generally was in the worst nutritional condition of any in reported medical history. This was not like the spectacular epidemics of child malnutrition which had horrified the world in mid-1968. This was slow, creeping debilitation, caused by long months of poor diet and continual hunger. In December it became clear that the final collapse of Biafra was imminent. On 10 January 1970, the war ended.

This was the moment at which so many of those sympathetic to the rebels' cause had forecast a bloodbath of revenge against the Ibo. No bloodbath took place. After a few days of unruliness, an uneasy calm took over. But there had been few preparations for the relief operation, for which the Nigerians now declared themselves and their own Red Cross Society solely responsible. Relations with most of the voluntary agencies and missions who had been operational in the rebel area had reached open rupture. But Unicef, thanks to the careful diplomacy of the past eighteen months, was still in federal favour. Labouisse's caution, his almost obsessive refusal to allow Unicef to be caught in the spotlight, had paid off. Among overseas humanitarian organizations, Unicef was in the unique position of being able to go into ex-rebel territory and contribute massively to the postwar relief and reconstruction effort.

Labouisse flew immediately to Lagos accompanied by Sasha Bacic, head of the Unicef Africa section and another aide. Within a few days of the cease-fire, he set off with Poul Larsen to assess needs in the Ibo heartland, an act of considerable courage given the forebodings of what was likely to occur there. Shortages of all kinds of food and essentials were extreme. A ship was immediately chartered by Unicef to provide coastal transport for fish, milk, medical supplies, trucks and ambulances, and a distribution network set up from Port Harcourt. A ship with CSM came in from Cotonou, Dahomey (Benin). Aircraft brought tons of other urgent supplies from Copenhagen. Vehicles were almost nonexistent in the area; with foresight, Unicef had ordered a fleet of trucks from England. Almost as critical were the conditions in hospitals and health centres, as well as the collapse of administration generally.

Meanwhile, all foreign journalists, and almost all relief and mission personnel, were ordered to leave. With the postwar calm balancing on a knife edge, General Gowon did not want any foreigners he distrusted in the area on the grounds that their presence might inflame the situation. Labouisse tried to persuade him to allow key hospital and health personnel to stay, but almost everyone from abroad was forced to depart and the area was effectively closed.

The Unicef team was allowed to remain. Sasha Bacic, a Yugoslav with wartime experience, was asked by Labouisse to act as Regional Director for Africa, and run the Unicef relief assistance programme in what had been the rebel territory. Bacic was capable of throwing the rule book out of the window and operating in unconventional circumstances on his own authority. In the administrative vacuum created by the end of the war, he requisitioned houses and warehouses, used whatever irregular methods were needed to unblock relief supplies from the overcrowded Port Harcourt docks, hired drivers and guards for the fleet of trucks under his supervision, and did everything he thought necessary to get relief supplies moving. The federal authorities allowed Unicef to assume an exceptional degree of operational responsibility for an organization whose usual role was to deliver supplies to government authorities and leave everything else to them. But Labouisse and Heyward knew that this course of action would have been quite inappropriate under the circumstances. Bacic was given free rein, and he used it.

Gradually, the new federal state which replaced 'Biafra' began to function administratively and the fears of a breakdown in security faded away. In April 1970, the Executive Board approved an allocation of over \$7 million for rehabilitation in Nigeria. The submission was scrupulously put together to cover education, health and nutritional services in all parts of the country, 'including particularly areas affected by the civil war'. In the eastern States, Bacic hired contractors and architects to re-roof schools, re-equip them with benches and blackboards, and continued to supply the

health centres and dispensaries now beginning to operate more normally with drugs and high-protein foods.

The period of most intense reconstruction lasted for around four months, during which Unicef liaised closely with the Nigerian Red Cross and the National Commission for Reconstruction. Towards the end of 1970, the operation was absorbed into local governmental machinery. By 1971, the programme had cast off its rehabilitation appearance, and become to all intents and purposes a programme of development co-operation indistinguishable from similar programmes elsewhere in Nigeria.

Controversy surrounded the Nigerian civil war and the huge international relief effort accompanying it. Its overall effectiveness, and the role within it of the various relief organizations, will forever remain subject to re-interpretation. The two years of tragedy inspired a great outpouring of energy and care from the international humanitarian community, and left its mark upon it. Whatever individual and organizational battles were fought, and whatever acts of true heroism were performed by both Nigerian and foreign relief workers in an effort to save the lives of mothers and children in the Ibo heartland, the sober reality was that around two million people starved—three quarters of whom were children under five years of age.

The late 1960s were the years of Bihar, the years of Nigerian civil conflict, and the years of Vietnam. Whatever the intention to steer a course closely along the path of development co-operation, disasters crept up or burst upon Unicef, demanding response. Discussions about whether they deflected resources and energy away from the longer-term, less dramatic tasks became academic. No-one could sit on the sidelines watching children die on the grounds that long-term programmes would solve the problem better. As the 1970s began; as cyclone and tidal wave battered the Bay of Bengal and civil war erupted in what was then East Pakistan; as refugees streamed towards Calcutta; as drought engulfed a great swathe of the African continent, leading to the notorious famine in Ethiopia and widespread hunger in the countries bordering the Sahara Desert; as the conflict in Indo China came to its messy conclusion . . . during these years disaster programmes and all they entailed became an inescapable fact of Unicef life. At the time of Bihar and Biafra, the emergencies seemed to be exceptions, temporary products of exceptional circumstances. Gradually, it began to seem as though the exception was becoming the rule.

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