

African Studies Quarterly

Volume 8, Issue 3

Spring 2006

The Politics of Humanitarian Organizations Intervention. Lanham. Obiagi Ndubisi. University of America Press, 2004. 120 pp.

Interventions by humanitarian organizations in conflict settings are mainly premised on the moral principle and the unquestionable need to alleviate suffering among the distressed population. However, their altruistic interventions are contentious, challenging and potentially capable of negative and unintended consequences. In his short but critical book, Ndubisi Obiagi, a Professor of Politics at Fort Valley State University, investigates activities and roles of several humanitarian organizations responsible for relief operations in the famine stricken areas during the Nigerian Civil war of 1967-1970. Hypotheses guiding the study and well explored in the text include attempts by the humanitarian actors to influence behaviour of belligerent's leadership, legitimacy, psychological and material support given to the Biafra regime by the humanitarian organizations.

Chapter one explores the multifaceted debate on the nature of intervention by third parties in civil wars. Some of the contentious issues confronting humanitarianism and analysed by the author include the meaning of intervention, the relationship between non-intervention and neutrality, justifications, political nature and legitimacy of humanitarian interventions. In its broader meaning, intervention becomes inevitable with consequences of strict impartiality likely to be more deleterious. Non-intervention can encourage the stronger party in the conflict: "A great nation intervenes in the domestic realm of other states when it says 'yes' and when it says 'no', by its sheer existence," Obiagi writes. Obiagi understands intervention through motivational and consequential analysis. Motivational analysis consists of actions that are "consciously conceived to affect the authoritative structure of the target" while consequential analysis consists of a "policy which has unintended or inadvertent consequences, indistinguishable from the consequences of intervention", an example being the case where relief aid strengthened the Biafra regime.

In the second chapter, the author explores the historical perspective of the Civil war, the role and interests of various third parties in the conflict. Interaction of many forces is attributed to the origin of the conflict, with prominence given to ethnic rivalries and competition for state control among the Ibo, Yoruba and Hausa-Fulani, the three dominant ethnic blocs in Nigeria. He then gives reasons and sequence of events that eventually led to concerted demands for a Biafran state and declaration of Independence in May 30, 1967. Motivations by foreign business firms, nation states, international organizations and humanitarian groups were varied. For the business firms and nation states, economic rationale was dominant, with oil being the prime interest of oil companies such as the Shell-B.P, the American Gulf, and the French SAFRAP. Britain, the ex-colonial power, had the highest stakes in the crisis with an estimated 52% total investment in the country while France's investment totalled \$71.28 million. Further interest was stimulated by the 1967 Middle East war and the closure of the Suez Canal, factors that increased demand and

value of the Nigerian oil. Additionally, Nigeria had a geographical advantage since oil from Middle East required transportation around the Cape.

America remained neutral while Britain and Russia gave Lagos military support and backed the “One Nigeria” concept. China’s support for the Biafran cause was influenced by a global Sino- Soviet rivalry and strong dislike for Lagos pro-Western policies. Tanzania, Zambia, Gabon and Ivory Coast supported Biafra on humanitarian grounds although Obiaga notes that Nyerere’s support may have been a “political gambit to bring diplomatic pressure on President Gowon” to negotiate with rebels. The perceived fear of balkanisation and a continental security threat resulting from Biafra’s secession motivated most African states to support Lagos. Support from France, China, Zambia, Tanzania, Gabon and Ivory Coast and direct dealings of the U.S with secessionists in relation to humanitarian assistance strengthened the status of Biafra in its unsuccessful efforts to obtain international recognition.

In the last two chapters, Obiaga analyzes intervention, impacts, challenges and controversies that surrounded operations of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and Churches. A detailed analysis shows that despite their humanitarian acts and motivations, humanitarian organizations attempted to influence behaviour of the leadership and also provided rebels with psychological and material support. The Church and missionaries were biased, political and committed to the rebel’s political goal of self-determination. Obiaga also interrogates the dual interpretations of the Geneva Convention and demonstrates how it was used by the government to justify starvation as a weapon of war. The Chapters also highlights the problems of access, limited negotiation capacities and unintended consequences as some of the operational challenges facing humanitarian organizations in situations of civil strife.

In the conclusion, Obiaga asserts that humanitarian organizations, together with other third parties, acted as major propaganda tool for Biafra and prolonged the war through material and psychological support to the rebels and a toughening of the Lagos’ attitude. Moral obligation forces third parties to intervene in grave situations regardless of possible repercussions because consequences of non-intervention can be more deleterious than unintended consequences. Starvation in Biafra exemplifies such a situation.

Obiaga’s book is a welcome and an invaluable contribution to the academic debates and literature on humanitarian intervention. The analysis of Nigerian conflict and a well-selected bibliography adds a comparative value to the existing literature covering more recent complex emergencies in Somalia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It is a useful book for researchers, academics and students interested in African conflicts. Staff working with relief agencies will definitely find the book indispensable.

The book doesn’t exhaust the subject and this was not the author’s intent. Some areas that lack deeper analysis and might need further research include the role of mercenaries and strategies to mitigate the unintended consequence of humanitarian intervention, an understanding that is imperative in peace building and conflict resolution. Considering the books length and by giving too much space to the nation states and international organizations as third parties to the conflict, the author did injustice to the book’s title. One would expect a more in-depth analysis of humanitarian organizations. The book’s quality is also compromised by lack of thorough editorial work

Thomas N Kimaru
University of the Witwatersrand