



# Human Rights and the United Nations in the Geopolitics of the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970)

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## Abstract

How did human rights advocacy during the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) interact with great-power interests and African regional diplomacy to shape whether—and how—the United Nations considered debating or intervening in the Nigeria–Biafra conflict? The aim of this article is to examine the attitudes of the great powers and African states toward the campaign to place the Nigerian Civil War on the agenda of the United Nations. To address this question, the study employs a descriptive case study method, drawing primary sources, including archival materials obtained from The National Archives in Kew, London, and the archives at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, as well as the secondary literature. Our analysis reveals that human rights advocacy generated sustained pressure—through petitions, parliamentary debates, and diplomatic messaging—to place the Nigeria–Biafra war on the UN agenda, whereas great-power calculations produced uneven support (e.g., episodic initiatives from Canada and France versus British resistance),

keeping the issue politically contested rather than institutionally actionable. African regional diplomacy, led by the Organization of African Unity (OAU), prioritized sovereignty and territorial integrity and urged UN members to avoid steps that could “internationalize” secession, a stance echoed by many African delegations even when they voiced humanitarian concern in General Assembly debates. As a result, the UN Secretariat under U Thant deferred to the OAU framework and treated the conflict as an internal matter, limiting UN engagement largely to humanitarian relief while avoiding formal debate or coercive intervention at the Security Council or General Assembly.

**Keywords**

*African geopolitics; great-power politics; human rights advocacy; Nigerian civil war; United Nations*

**Introduction**

Globally, conflicts become human rights issues once human lives are threatened by the military operations that accompany them. If human rights are a serious concern in everyday life, they become even more critical during wartime. The Nigerian Civil War became a focal point of human rights campaigns that called for political and diplomatic intervention by the United Nations. These efforts were spearheaded by human rights groups, non-governmental organizations, churches, and national governments in Europe and North America. The civil war inspired numerous human rights organizations that believed in the ideal of a just world (Götz, 2024), emphasizing liberty and a broader commitment to humanitarian action.

The United Nations was widely regarded as the only multilateral body capable of resolving the Nigeria–Biafra crisis, particularly after the conflict extended beyond military confrontation to encompass grave human rights concerns. Beginning in July 1967, the United Nations received a series of communications from around the world urging that the Nigerian–Biafran conflict be discussed at both the General Assembly and the Security Council. On 19 July 1967, while the Consultative Committee of the Organization of African Unity

(OAU) was meeting in Kinshasa to deliberate on the civil war, the Special Representative of the Republic of Biafra in the United States and Canada, Nwonye Otue, wrote an official letter to the UN Secretary-General, U Thant. In the letter, he expressed concern over what he described as the global “wait-and-see” attitude toward the Nigeria–Biafra War and the apparent disregard for the suffering and hardship endured by civilians in the war zone (Nwonye, 1967).

The year 1968 witnessed intense human rights campaigns led by prominent individuals and international human rights organizations in major world capitals such as London, Washington, DC, Lisbon, and Paris. These campaigns protested global inaction regarding the civil war and called for an UN-backed resolution on the conflict (Achebe, 2012). Petitions were presented and communiqués issued to the UN Secretary-General, U Thant, during the war. Questions were raised about what the United Nations was doing to ensure the adequate protection of civilian lives and property in the face of military confrontation and massacres. As Albert S. Balima argued, “it seems that more silence from the UN would be harmful and now is the time that the United Nations voice should be heard for it is its duty to solve this problem otherwise, if the UN has to be but a rostrum for the third world claims, it would not have fulfilled its real mission” (Balima, 1968). The movement acquired a geopolitical dimension when some UN member states joined the call for UN intervention, while major great powers resisted efforts to have the war formally debated at the United Nations. This became a highly significant episode in shaping the international politics of the civil war.

The aim of this article is to examine the attitudes of the great powers and African states toward the campaign to place the Nigerian Civil War on the agenda of the United Nations. While the study discusses the responses of both the Biafran and Nigerian governments to proposals for debating the conflict, it also analyzes the reaction of the United Nations to efforts aimed at bringing the war before the General Assembly and the Security Council. The study draws on primary sources, including archival materials obtained from The National Archives in Kew, London, and the

archives at the United Nations Headquarters in New York. It also makes use of secondary sources from the Kenneth Dike Library at the University of Ibadan, as well as relevant internet sources.

This study is structured around the following research question: How did human rights advocacy during the Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) interact with great-power interests and African regional diplomacy to shape whether—and how—the United Nations considered debating or intervening in the Nigeria–Biafra conflict? To address this question, the study employs a descriptive case study method, “one that is focused and detailed in which proportions and questions about a phenomenon are carefully scrutinized and articulated at the outset” (Tobin, 2010, p. 288). The findings reveal that the Nigeria–Biafra experience contributed to the emergence of a human rights consciousness anchored in international consensus to address humanitarian catastrophes wherever they occur. The United Nations was widely perceived as the only multilateral institution capable of resolving the Nigeria–Biafra crisis, especially once the conflict had escalated beyond military confrontation to encompass serious human rights violations. The scale of human suffering witnessed during the war was such that no responsible organization, particularly the United Nations, was expected to remain idle. The UN was therefore seen as duty-bound to work actively, in collaboration with regional organizations, to address the crisis. It was proposed that the General Assembly could adopt a resolution recognizing the international humanitarian obligations arising from the Nigerian situation and, under the authority of the UN Charter, mandate the Secretary-General to use his good offices and all available resources to expedite the achievement of a peaceful settlement between the parties to the conflict. National governments were expected to support these efforts.

However, the United Nations ultimately took the position that the conflict constituted an internal affair and that it should refrain from direct involvement. The OAU had already established a Consultative Committee to address the Nigerian crisis, composed of the leaders of Niger, Liberia, Cameroon, Congo-Kinshasa, Ghana, and Ethiopia. Despite sustained campaigns to place the matter on

the UN agenda, the great powers were strongly influenced by the positions of both the UN Secretary-General and the OAU. Given that the issue concerned civil war and secession, many African states preferred to keep the matter within an African framework and discouraged recourse to the General Assembly, as the Secretary-General observed.

The first section of this study examines how certain Western nations attempted to place the Nigerian Civil War on the official agenda of the United Nations. The second section analyzes the reactions of African states during debates at the United Nations General Assembly. The third section explores the responses and attitudes of the United Nations to global calls for UN-backed discussions of the civil war.

## **The United Nations, Human Rights, and the Geopolitics of the Civil War**

The campaign for a United Nations intervention in the Nigerian Civil War assumed a geopolitical dimension when national governments—particularly in Europe, North America, and Africa—began facing mounting pressure from their citizens and advocacy groups to sponsor debates on the conflict at the UN General Assembly or Security Council. In the United States, members of Congress and various pressure groups exerted significant pressure on the government to persuade UN Secretary-General U Thant to mediate in the civil war (Wilford, 1968).

The call for urgent debate at the United Nations was brought before the U.S. House of Representatives in Washington, DC, by several congressmen who felt they could no longer remain passive as conditions in Nigeria and Biafra deteriorated. On 4 December 1967, Congressman Benjamin Resnick, a New York Democrat and known supporter of Biafra, together with eight other congressmen—Brown of California, Conyers, Farbstein, Gray, Halpern, Hawkins, Mizer, and Rees—submitted a resolution. The resolution, which was referred to the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, appealed to the United Nations and other appropriate bodies to

take measures, including the dispatch of impartial observers, to protect civilian lives in the conflict zone (Owen, 1967).

Similarly, on 26 July 1968, Senator Eugene J. McCarthy, a Democratic presidential candidate and former Chairman of the African Affairs Subcommittee of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, issued a statement at his campaign headquarters in Washington, DC. He urged the U.S. government to bring a resolution before the United Nations calling for an air and sea lift of food supplies to Biafra, where the civil war had resulted in widespread starvation and civilian deaths. He argued that if the United Nations proved reluctant to act, the United States should take the initiative (United States of America Government, 1968).

The U.S. government began to pay closer attention to domestic calls for UN intervention when Senator Edward Kennedy delivered his well-known speech on the Nigerian Civil War before Congress on 23 September 1968. In the speech, he urged President Richard Nixon to support efforts to place the conflict on the agenda of the UN General Assembly. Other members of Congress who supported UN action included Senators Russell, Mansfield, Lausche, Symington, Dodd, Proxmire, Charles E. Goodell, and John Dow of New York. Only Senator Pearson expressed the view that African state delegates at the UN General Assembly preferred to have the matter resolved within an African framework rather than through UN intervention (United States Congressional Record—Senate, 24-24 September 1968; United States Congressional Record, 31 July & 25 September 1968; Markpress News Feature Service, 1969). This position aligned with the official U.S. government stance that the civil war was primarily a local and African issue, and that external intervention would have limited prospects of success (United States Department of State, 2005a, 2005b).

Canada was another country that considered presenting the Nigerian Civil War at the United Nations, largely in response to domestic pressure arising from concern over the humanitarian catastrophe in Biafra and Nigeria. On 17 September 1968, the Canadian Minister of External Affairs, Mitchell Sharp, declared before Parliament that he had considered whether Canada should refer the

humanitarian aspects of the conflict to the UN (Rogers, 1969). He noted that he and Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau were devoting more attention to the Biafra issue than to any other matter at the time (Rogers, 1969). For Biafran officials, the Canadian government's willingness to raise the issue at the UN was seen as a positive diplomatic development, as noted by the Biafran Commissioner for Foreign Affairs, Matthew Mbu, on 18 September 1968, and by General Ojukwu during the October 1968 visit of Canadian Member of Parliament Stephen Lewis to Biafra (Markpress News Feature Service, 1968a, 1968b, 1968c).

However, the Nigerian government was displeased with Canada's position. Consequently, on 20 September 1968, a scheduled meeting between General Yakubu Gowon and a Canadian observer team led by General Alexandra—initially planned for 21 September—was cancelled. The Canadian High Commissioner in Nigeria was also summoned for questioning. It required the intervention of the Canadian Representative at the UN, Ignatieff, to prevent further escalation, especially as Secretary-General U Thant himself was not enthusiastic about bringing the matter before the General Assembly or Security Council (United Kingdom Mission to the United Nations, 1968).

The French government adopted a strong position in favor of presenting the Nigerian Civil War at the United Nations following its declaration of 31 July 1968. In that statement, the French Secretary of State for Information, M. Joël Le Theule, emphasized that the conflict should be resolved on the basis of the right to self-determination and through appropriate international procedures. General Charles de Gaulle further stated that “only a political solution which took into account the rights of the Biafran people to self-determination could resolve the Nigerian–Biafran question” (British Embassy Paris, 1968). Initially, France appeared primarily concerned with the humanitarian dimension of the war, advocating an arms embargo on both sides to reduce loss of life and protect civilians (Fafowora, 1990).

On 7 October 1968, French Foreign Minister Michel Debré brought the Biafran issue before the UN General Assembly, deliv-

ering a speech in which he argued that any resolution of the war must be consistent with the principle of self-determination enshrined in the UN Charter. His remarks suggested that France supported Biafran independence. This stance reflected both De Gaulle's strategic calculation that Biafra had developed a distinct national consciousness and his desire to prevent a large Anglophone federation from dominating smaller Francophone states in West Africa (British Embassy Paris, 1968).

At a meeting of the French Foreign Affairs Committee of the National Assembly on 12 October 1968, Debré reiterated that peaceful negotiations would be impossible unless Biafra's right to self-determination was recognized, particularly by the United Nations (British Embassy Paris, 1968). During a meeting in New York on the same day, Debré told Secretary-General U Thant that a community of twelve million people had the right to determine its own future, arguing that Biafra differed significantly from the rest of Nigeria in terms of race, religion, and culture. U Thant, however, responded that he could not endorse secession, either as Secretary-General or in any other capacity. He warned that endorsing secession would jeopardize African unity and potentially lead to chaos (Foreign Office, 1968).

In a conversation with U.S. Secretary of State William Rogers in Washington, DC, on 1 March 1969, Debré rejected the argument that the General Assembly lacked competence to address the Biafra question due to the existence of the OAU. He argued that if continental organizations rendered the UN incompetent in such matters, the UN would soon retain jurisdiction only over the oceans and seas. Secretary Rogers replied that both governments were aware that the OAU did not consider UN involvement appropriate and had themselves resisted such intervention. Although the United States had hoped the UN might play a constructive role, it did not see a viable path forward (United States Department of State, 2005a, 2005b).

On 8 August 1969, French official Beaumarchais informed U.S. National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger that President Georges Pompidou had observed that while the United Nations devoted

considerable time to issues such as Rhodesia, it failed to examine the Nigerian–Biafra crisis. In response, it was argued that the Nigerian conflict was a political matter in which many African states supported the Federal Military Government and were reluctant to have it debated at the UN. On 5 February 1969, the Italian Parliament passed a motion declaring the Nigeria–Biafra conflict an international matter under the United Nations Convention of 9 December 1948. The motion, introduced by Honourable Fracanzani, asserted that only UN intervention could achieve a peaceful resolution, given the moral, political, and legal grounds for such action (Markpress News Feature Service, 1969). At the 354th Ministerial Meeting of the Council of the Western European Union, held in Rome on 21–22 October 1968, the Italian Secretary for Foreign Affairs, S.E. M.F. Malfatti, urged member states to raise the issue at the United Nations, citing strong public and parliamentary concern in Italy (Walter, 1968).

The Swedish government, on humanitarian grounds, also sought to present the conflict at the United Nations. This proposal followed discussions in Stockholm between Swedish officials, representatives of the International Committee of the Red Cross, and Biafran authorities. The initiative was prompted by a report on the humanitarian catastrophe in Biafra sent to Prime Minister Tage Erlander by Commander Carl Gustaf von Rosen. However, when Von Rosen presented the issue to Secretary-General U Thant in New York, the latter maintained that the matter was an internal Nigerian issue and declined to intervene.

Britain, despite acknowledging the humanitarian dimensions of the conflict, was disinclined to support debate of the Nigerian Civil War at the United Nations. Gray Blank (2013) has argued that the war was a major foreign policy concern for the Harold Wilson government, Parliament, and Britain as a whole. Given Britain's policy of supporting the Federal Nigerian government, it was not in its interest to refer the conflict to the UN in a manner that might undermine British strategic interests. This reasoning underpinned Britain's opposition to Canadian and French diplomatic initiatives calling for UN debate. British officials relied on the principle that

the United Nations should not intervene in matters essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of a member state. Although the UN engaged in humanitarian operations through agencies such as UNICEF, the UK avoided supporting calls for political debate at the UN, as this would contradict the Federal Government's claim that the war was an internal matter (Moberly, 1968). Britain therefore relied on the Nigerian Federal Government to take steps to prevent the inscription of the conflict on the agenda of the General Assembly or Security Council.

Nearly all countries that considered raising the issue at the United Nations were diplomatically engaged by British officials in an effort to discourage such initiatives. According to Williams Ajibola, governments including NATO allies such as the Netherlands, Scandinavian countries, the Republic of Ireland, and Canada contemplated bringing the matter before the UN, but Britain intervened after protests from the Federal Government of Nigeria, and the plans were abandoned (Ajibola, 1978). The United Kingdom's Diplomatic Mission to the UN in New York also consulted African delegates—including some not unsympathetic to the Biafran cause—regarding the possibility of debate. They found that African states were generally unwilling to have the matter raised at the UN, particularly while the OAU was actively addressing it through various peace summits.

Similarly, the Nigerian government was encouraged to instruct its diplomats in New York to lobby other UN member states to abandon any proposed resolutions. The British government handled the issue with caution, seeking to avoid confrontation at the United Nations between Western countries and African states, whose views had been clearly articulated through the OAU. Nevertheless, this did not prevent UN member states from expressing their views on the conflict during General Assembly debates. Evidence indicates that numerous countries, including African states, spoke about the tragic conflict in line with their respective national positions.

## **African States and United Nations General Assembly Debates During the Civil War**

It is noteworthy that the controversy surrounding the formal inscription of the Nigerian Civil War on the United Nations agenda did not prevent African states from commenting on the conflict during General Assembly debates. For example, in his speech at the General Assembly session in October 1968, the Zambian Foreign Minister, Kamanga, stated that the conflict between Nigeria and Biafra deserved the attention of the world body. Zambia therefore believed that, in fulfillment of its universal mission and in accordance with Articles 11, 12, and 35 of the UN Charter, the United Nations should take up this critical issue and play a constructive role in bringing about lasting peace in Nigeria and Biafra (United Kingdom Mission to the United Nations, 1968).

The Algerian Foreign Minister, Abdelaziz Bouteflika, addressing the General Assembly, noted that while Algeria shared the humanitarian concerns arising from the conflict, it could not overlook the fact that the primary cause of the war was the attempted secession that had triggered the civil war in Nigeria. Although the humanitarian dimension deeply affected African states, he argued that it should not obscure the political reality: namely, a serious challenge to the unity and territorial integrity of an African state. Similarly, the Burundian Foreign Minister, Ntawurishira, observed that the war in Nigeria had caused numerous casualties and was deplored by his government. He warned that the success of secession anywhere in Africa, regardless of its motivation, would likely lead to the fragmentation of many African states.

In the same vein, the Foreign Minister of Congo-Brazzaville, M. Mondjo, declared that while his country condemned the war and its attendant horrors and injustices, it also condemned the secession, which he described as being cleverly inspired and encouraged from abroad with the aim of weakening the Federation of Nigeria. The representative of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uamba di Lutete, similarly emphasized that Nigeria's unity and territorial

integrity must be safeguarded in accordance with both the spirit of the UN Charter and relevant resolutions of the OAU.

The Ethiopian representative, Yifru, stated that Ethiopia believed the solution to the Nigerian crisis should essentially be left to Nigerians themselves, in line with the OAU Heads of State resolution of 16 September 1968, which called for an immediate cessation of hostilities based on the principle of a sovereign and united Nigeria. Abdoulaye, the representative of Guinea, maintained that the civil war must be resolved in accordance with the principles of the OAU Charter, which had been freely accepted by all African states. In his view, only full respect for the OAU Charter could prevent further wars in Africa. The Malian representative, Ousman Bâ, insisted that secession was condemned for objective reasons by Africans directly concerned, and that any contrary position would amount to direct support for imperialist monopolies and centrifugal forces hostile to the unity and independence of African states.

Laraki, the Moroccan representative, stated that his government had strongly hoped that the secessionist leaders, fully aware of the consequences of war, would cooperate with the Federal authorities to restore peace and unity within a framework of national integrity. Gaye, representing Senegal, argued that the internecine conflict extended beyond Nigeria and affected the future of Africa as a whole. He noted that African states had turned to the OAU to find a solution through the mission entrusted to the OAU Heads of State of Cameroon, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, and Niger (United Kingdom Mission, 1969).

In contrast, the Tanzanian Foreign Minister, Mhando, told the General Assembly that it was inaccurate to describe the Nigerian Civil War as purely an African problem. Neither Nigeria nor Biafra manufactured the weapons used in the war, and the arms did not originate from Africa. A war fought on African soil with weapons supplied by superpowers could not be characterized as exclusively African. Tanzania therefore regarded the conflict as a human problem in which all nations represented in the General Assembly were implicated, particularly those supplying the instruments of mass destruction (Rogers, 1969).

Similarly, the Foreign Minister of Ivory Coast, Usher, informed the General Assembly that while it was commendable for Africa to show deep concern about the Nigerian Civil War, it was unacceptable to remain indifferent to a conflict that had claimed approximately two million lives according to some estimates. To protest what he described as an attitude unworthy of African humanism, Ivory Coast decided to abstain from supporting any resolutions concerning the conflict until it was brought to an end (Rogers, 1969).

The question of UN involvement in the civil war was a highly complex issue between the Nigerian and Biafran leaderships. The Biafran government was fully supportive of an international resolution of the conflict under the auspices of the United Nations. Biafran authorities believed that their right to existence could be secured if the UN assumed responsibility for the peace process and humanitarian operations, as UN involvement would further legitimize the establishment of the new republic (Caradon, 1968). They argued that it was paradoxical to consider only the OAU capable of resolving the crisis, while excluding the United Nations from playing any role. After all, the UN Charter is founded on principles of peace and security, the peaceful settlement of disputes, and respect for fundamental human rights, justice, and self-determination (Markpress News Feature Service, 1969). According to Ojukwu, “the UN should have intervened because of her obligation to protect life and property and the fundamental human rights entrenched in the Charter” (Markpress News Feature Service, 1970).

In a letter addressed to the President of the UN General Assembly, Angie Brooks, on 3 October 1968, Ojukwu expressed concern over the failure of national governments to prevent acts of genocide and to establish a humanitarian order grounded in equal rights and self-determination for the peoples of the region (Markpress News Feature Service, 1968a, 1968b, 1968c). He urged the General Assembly to invoke Article 8 of the Genocide Convention and take appropriate action under the Charter to prevent and suppress acts of genocide (Brucker, 2019).

Biafran representatives intensified their lobbying efforts at the

United Nations in an attempt to ensure that the world body gave due attention to the conflict and formally debated it. Professor Eni Njoku, leader of the Biafran Observer Group at the 24th Session of the General Assembly, wrote to Secretary-General U Thant on 14 October 1969, highlighting delegates' concerns over the tragic consequences of the war, particularly civilian suffering, hunger, and starvation. He also pointed to concerns about the open intervention of major powers, notably Britain and the Soviet Union, which, in his view, made it impossible for Africans to resolve the matter independently, as would otherwise have been expected. This intervention had contributed to the OAU's failure to resolve the conflict despite establishing an Ad Hoc Committee.

Despite being a member of the United Nations and a signatory to the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Genocide Convention, and the 1949 Geneva Conventions (Markpress News Feature Service, 1968a, 1968b, 1968c), the Nigerian government opposed any UN-backed deliberation of the civil war. It maintained that its sovereignty and territorial integrity required that it retain full authority over its internal affairs without external interference. During a meeting with the British Representative to the United Nations, Lord Caradon, the Nigerian Ambassador, Ogbu, stated that "the Nigerian Government was most anxious that the problems of Nigeria should not be internationalized and consequently they were anxious to prevent any UN action in regard to Nigeria internal affairs. Thus, any UN action in regard to Nigeria would be unwelcome" (Caradon, 1968).

The Nigerian government also expressed diplomatic appreciation for the Secretary-General's position against placing the conflict on the agenda of either the General Assembly or the Security Council. On 15 February 1969, the Federal Commissioner for Transport, J. S. Tarka, issued a press release from the Federal Ministry of Information expressing gratitude for Secretary-General U Thant's supportive statement. Tarka had visited U Thant at UN Headquarters in New York on that date. Earlier, at a press conference, the Secretary-General had reaffirmed his support for the principle articulated by the Federal Military Government in its effort to

defeat Biafran secession (Federal Military Government of Nigeria, 1969).

The Federal Government's position was further articulated by the Federal Commissioner for External Affairs, Okoi Arikpo, who addressed the General Assembly in New York and reaffirmed Nigeria's indivisibility as a single political entity (Arikpo, 1969). While Biafra sought UN debate as a means of internationalizing what it framed as a human rights struggle with international legitimacy, the Federal Government resisted such efforts, fearing that UN deliberation could undermine its objective of preserving national unity and securing victory. Nigeria relied on the support of the OAU to oppose diplomatic initiatives at the UN and cautioned other member states against endorsing such proposals. In line with this stance, Secretary-General U Thant dismissed calls for UN debate as a futile exercise.

## The United Nations Reaction to Human Rights Campaigners

In responding to the conflict, the United Nations was guided primarily by the resolutions adopted by the OAU at its meetings in Kinshasa and Algiers. The OAU urged all UN member states and all OAU members to refrain from any action likely to undermine the peace, unity, and territorial integrity of Nigeria. This directive significantly shaped the UN's response to human rights campaigners during the conflict, which was widely regarded as an African problem to be resolved by Africans (Adefuye, 1992). The UN recognized that political debate at the General Assembly or Security Council would be unproductive in the face of OAU opposition.

During a visit to Addis Ababa in 1969, Secretary-General U Thant suggested to Emperor Haile Selassie that the OAU should consider developing an imaginative constitutional arrangement—possibly in the form of a loose confederation between Nigeria and Biafra—with some degree of international involvement in implementing any settlement devised by the OAU (United Kingdom Mission to the United Nations, 1969).

Secretary-General U Thant adopted a non-interventionist posture and deferred to regional bodies such as the OAU. He granted the OAU considerable latitude in decision-making and implementation, thereby limiting the UN's role in discussing the Nigerian conflict. A UN initiative would have appeared to acknowledge the international character of the conflict, a step that would have been unacceptable to the Nigerian government, its allies, and the majority of UN member states that did not recognize Biafra (Achebe, 2012). U Thant's position was further reinforced by the fact that Biafra had not been officially recognized by the OAU. It was argued that recognition by the continental body should precede any endorsement by the UN or other multilateral institutions. As Bernard Odogwu observed, "Biafra, as far as the OAU was concerned, was non-existent... and moreover Biafra on her own part did not show enough cause why OAU decision should have been otherwise" (Odogwu, 1985).

This context strengthened the UN's resistance to formal debate on the issue and coincided with growing Federal opposition to internationalizing the conflict. As Chinua Achebe noted, a vacuum emerged in moral and humanitarian leadership at the UN, which allowed the Federal Military Government of Nigeria to operate without adequate international oversight (Achebe, 2012). Despite such criticism, Williams Ajibola (1978) argued that the UN's overall stance during the war amounted to a form of neutral pro-federalism, as the organization treated the situation as an internal Nigerian affair and continued to recognize the Federal Government as the legitimate authority. This position, in effect, contributed to Nigeria's diplomatic and military advantage in the civil war.

## Conclusion

The harrowing accounts of human rights violations during the conflict opened a new frontier for human rights advocacy at the United Nations. Voluntary organizations and human rights activists converged on UN headquarters, demanding an end to the conflict and calling for urgent action on behalf of war victims, including

measures to prevent genocide in any form. Numerous petitions and communiqués were submitted to Secretary-General U Thant by organizations, governments, and prominent individuals worldwide during the civil war.

In the 1960s, as countries sought to play more active roles in global affairs and promote human rights internationally, the Nigerian Civil War presented an opportunity for states such as Canada to advance these foreign policy objectives. Issues that attracted significant attention within Canadian society included allegations of genocide, indiscriminate bombing and shooting of civilians, mass starvation, Biafra's claim to self-determination, and the supply of arms to both sides of the conflict. Canada maintained that all human beings, including those in war zones, were equal in dignity and worth. Accordingly, it viewed the United Nations as the only institution capable of organizing the humanitarian action necessary to protect civilian victims. By advocating accelerated UN deliberation on the conflict, Canada took active steps to draw global attention to the plight of those affected by the war.

Public opinion in the United States was similarly shaped by concerns over human rights and civilian protection. France's understanding of human rights centered on Biafra's claim to self-determination and sovereign freedom, which it believed could be realized through appropriate international legal procedures. Britain, however, strongly opposed discussing the war at the UN, fearing that such action would undermine its political and diplomatic objectives in support of the Federal Government.

Under Secretary-General U Thant, the United Nations adopted a cautious approach to calls for UN-backed intervention on human rights grounds. Nonetheless, the Nigerian Civil War contributed to the globalization of human rights discourse, anchored in an emerging international consensus that lives endangered by conflict must be protected wherever such crises occur. The war marked an important phase in the evolution of global humanitarian consciousness, grounded in liberal democratic principles that encourage public engagement with international issues and affirm the inherent value of human life.

The international community increasingly acknowledged its responsibility to alleviate human suffering in all its forms. Human suffering came to be regarded as a matter of global concern, demanding effective international action. Framing the Nigerian conflict as a struggle for justice and human rights influenced prominent figures in Western Europe and North America, who viewed the issue not merely as a legal or theoretical question of secession but as a fundamental matter of safeguarding basic human rights.

Human rights movements during the civil war were particularly active in North America and Western Europe. The existence of liberal democratic spaces in these societies facilitated the emergence of grassroots awareness and advocacy concerning the conflict. Humanitarian concerns were amplified by public opinion, including widespread discussion about the right of civilians to live and survive amidst war. There was a growing recognition that human beings possess an inherent right to life under all circumstances. In this context, the Nigerian Civil War became a powerful reminder of the need for global solidarity with populations trapped in conflict, reinforcing the imperative to defend human dignity in times of war.

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