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Between the ‘Colonial’ and the ‘Post-Colonial’: Portugal and Humanitarian Engagements During the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967–1970)

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ABSTRACT

Portugal’s role in the Nigeria-Biafra War has so far been overlooked in the literature on the humanitarian crisis it generated. This article seeks to fill that gap by looking into the Portuguese colonial and authoritarian regime’s multifaceted intervention in support of Biafra and the ways in which humanitarian engagements became crucial to Portuguese policy. In doing so, it focuses on the relations between Portuguese authorities, humanitarian organisations working on the ground and the Biafran elites, as well as on the debates generated by the establishment and consolidation of the São Tomé airlift and other relief projects. It discusses cooperation and independence crafting between the humanitarian and political realms, focusing on the debates emanating from the relevance of São Tomé to the crisis. It shows the variety of humanitarian initiatives taken by the Portuguese and how these were framed within a strategy to promote a more palatable image of the regime. Finally, it argues that the Portuguese case is relevant to rethink the history of the Biafran crisis and the 1960s dynamics of relief, as it brings back the role of states to these debates and frames these within a more nuanced conception of colonial/post-colonial chronologies.

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Introduction

Less than a decade after their independence from British colonial rule, ethnic persecution against the Ibo and divergencies regarding the organisation of the state in Nigeria precipitated a secessionist attempt by the Eastern Province (with a majority of Ibo population), in May 1967. A violent war raged by the Nigerian Federal Forces, led by General Yakubu Gwon, against the secessionist Biafran Republic, led by Lieutenant-Colonel Odumengwu Ojukwu, ravaged the country between the following July and January 1970, and drove the first live broadcast humanitarian crisis in Africa. In January 1970, with the capitulation of Biafran forces imminent, a briefing by Portuguese officials stated the following:

As far as Portugal is concerned, given that the support granted to BIAFRA is no secret to the vast majority of the population – among whom there has been a general feeling of sympathy [with the Biafran cause] –, it is to be expected that [the fall of Biafra] will provoke particular disappointment linked to the subconscious feeling that this was a cause in the defence of which PORTUGAL engaged unsuccessfully. It is thought,

however, that this psychological position, if it exists, could be easily mitigated if the emphasis is placed, in our media, on the humanitarian aspect of the Portuguese intervention.¹

Despite mentioned in the literature about the Nigerian civil war, Portugal's wide-ranging engagement in the conflict has been insufficiently analysed and is often relegated to a secondary role in narratives that focus primarily on Western commitments to warfare and relief efforts.² Portugal's lesser relevance in Cold War dynamics, its increasingly discredited international position associated with pressures for decolonisation, its declared neutral stance and the policy of secrecy surrounding its involvement might help to explain this misrepresentation. Conversely, these factors are also pertinent in understanding its involvement in the war. The above appraisal attests to the substantial investment made by Portugal in the conflict and the country's support for the Biafran cause. It also shows the readiness of the Portuguese authorities to exploit their humanitarian role as a mitigating factor for (ill-fated) political decisions.

The inclusion of Portugal in the analysis of external interventions in the war and humanitarian crisis is relevant for several reasons. It contributes to the history of humanitarianism, reinforcing approaches that situate the Biafran crisis within complex settings of changes and continuities³, by considering different chronologies of the end of imperial rule and how these were reflected in the dynamics of humanitarian intervention. It brings to the fore extended chronologies of a continued colonial presence and how concomitant colonial and post-colonial dynamics intersected in shaping humanitarian endeavours in Global South geographies, moving beyond the dual relationship between former metropolises and colonies. These dynamics are significant to our understanding of non-governmental strategies of care, fundraising and public engagement⁴, but also of how humanitarian repertoires were pivotal in imperial attempts to legitimise geopolitical interests. Portugal's engagement in the Biafra crisis was part of a multifaceted support strategy motivated by colonial interests and foresaw the disruption of the African post-colonial state system. Although declaring strict neutrality, Portuguese authorities sought to undermine Nigeria's regional and anti-colonial dominance⁵, and convey the idea that the Federal Government was unable to protect the civilian population. Conversely, Portugal's wide-ranging assistance was based on a desire to support Biafra's capacity to function as a state. The crisis was also used to reinforce the Portuguese narrative that the colonial system provided civilians with better living conditions and stability, as a means of legitimising the empire's preservation internationally. With that objective in mind, officials relied on developmental and human rights repertoires⁶, but also those based on rescue and relief. Portuguese humanitarian engagements increasingly made the regime more palatable in the international sphere, namely among Western actors.

The Portuguese case also adds to the literature demonstrating that State actors actively participated in the management and development of the humanitarian crisis.⁷ An analysis of the relationships among Portuguese authorities, Biafran leaders and humanitarian (mainly faith-based) actors contributes to an unfolding of the history of the crisis. Portuguese policies differed from other states that subsequently fostered similar multipronged interventions – such as France – as authorities prioritised discretion and limited direct involvement in order to circumvent anti-colonial criticism. Nevertheless, Portuguese authorities and aid organisations were committed to humanitarian efforts in Lisbon and São Tomé, either cooperating with voluntary organisations or negotiating directly with Biafran elites. In doing so, they performed a form of *symbolic humanitarianism*. Here *symbolic humanitarianism* is understood in two different but related dimensions. The first relates to the small-scale nature of investments in humanitarian endeavours, even though enough to shape repertoires of governance intended to promote a benevolent idea of the state. The second is associated with the preformistic character of symbolism, in the sense that humanitarian values and practices are employed in such a way as to project that benevolent image, either domestically or internationally. In this case, Portuguese authorities adopted and adapted humanitarian repertoires of governance while investing just enough in various projects with the intent of projecting a more palatable image of the regime in international spheres.

Analysing the São Tomé airlift and other programmes in the Portuguese colony and in Lisbon, this article explores the ways in which aid organisations and political actors employed humanitarian diplomacy to overcome barriers to the provision of relief.⁸ It reveals the pertinence of religious and diplomatic networks as channels for humanitarian diplomacy and how the international dimension of the crisis was significant in expediting decision-making processes. While São Tomé is often viewed merely as a logistics base of operations, a place of passage, the interactions between the different actors, the debates surrounding the operation, and the projects developed on the island make this Portuguese colony an essential locus from which to approach the crisis. Humanitarian diplomacy successes meant that the relief operation on and from São Tomé came to be regarded as ‘the lifeline to Biafra’. The article tackles the various implications of this expression for the actors involved, leading to debates about prolongation of the war, entanglements between relief and military action, and reform within the humanitarian sector.⁹

It also analyses the relationship between Portuguese and Biafran leaders as well as how humanitarian efforts benefited both parties. The Biafran and Portuguese authorities were linked by geopolitical interests but also by sovereignty narratives encompassing developmental and modernising ideas associated with evolutionary thought. In these, they found common ground to counter accusations of colonial oppression in the former case, and of victimhood – driven by the mediatisation of the crisis – in the latter.¹⁰ Entanglements between humanitarianism and development are also significant in determining that Portugal was an indirect beneficiary of foreign humanitarian endeavours.

Portugal’s particular political context is also unique with respect to the engagement of civil society. Unlike most foreign participants in the war, Portugal was living under an authoritarian regime with an ethos based on preserving colonial rule, supporting a strong Catholic culture, and keeping civil society under control. The authoritarian nature of the New State (*Estado Novo*), associated with economic frailty (compared to Western powers), not only shaped the country’s geopolitical interests but also fostered a situation of limited engagement by civil society. In this sense, this makes the case for approaching the humanitarian momentum of the Biafran crisis by looking at the ways in which different actors – Portuguese officials, media and aid organisations, recipients of aid (Biafran leaders) and foreign relief actors – articulated their motivations, arguments and resources.

This article is based on research in Portuguese archives, and in the available archives of the organisations involved in humanitarian relief – the Archiv des Diakonischen Werkes der EKD, the World Council of Churches archives, the International Committee for the Red Cross Archives, and the Portuguese Red Cross archives. The first section explores the outlines of the Portuguese policy during the war and the relationship between Portuguese and Biafran political elites. The second focuses on the São Tomé airlift and the debates generated by this endeavour, and the third on other Portuguese-led humanitarian initiatives, exploring how political and non-governmental actors employed humanitarian diplomacy. The main arguments are summarised in the conclusion.

‘We cannot be held responsible for news or rumours in the international press’: sustaining Portuguese neutrality

The Portuguese-Biafran partnership preceded Lieutenant-Colonel Odumengwu Ojukwu’s declaration of independence on 30 May 1967. Contacts between the two parties go back to March, when the Ministry of Foreign Affairs promised a ‘friendly policy’ in the case of a blockade imposed by the Nigerian Government.¹¹ During the war, the Portuguese intervention developed along different lines and fronts. The initial months were focused on facilitating the transit of Biafran leaders, civilians and resources (including military equipment) through Portuguese airports. Later, Portuguese involvement became increasingly sophisticated, comprising diplomatic counsel, the selling of military equipment, currency circulation, the issuing of Biafran stamps, and active

participation in humanitarian projects. Still, Portugal declared strict neutrality during the war. This section analyses the ambiguous dynamics of the Portuguese policy, showing the pragmatic coordination of political interests between Portuguese and Biafran officials.

Portuguese authorities employed humanitarian terminology and international instruments from the beginning of hostilities to frame their stance in the war. On 15 July 1967, Nigeria pressured Portugal to immediately terminate the use of São Tomé as a destination for flights exiting the Eastern Region, now the self-proclaimed Republic of Biafra. It was concerned about the island being used as an arms transit base after the blockade was imposed. According to the Governor of São Tomé, these initial flights carried 'Nigerian refugees' and foreigners associated with the oil industry who were experiencing increasing difficulties in exiting or entering Biafra through Fernando Pó.¹² The reply to the Nigerian demand entailed a declaration of strict neutrality, with Portugal responding to the Federal Government's argument by pointing out the domestic nature of the conflict. Portuguese officials explicitly denied any accountability regarding arms trafficking, citing the provisions of the 1944 Chicago Convention on International Civil Aviation. They could not 'be held responsible for news or rumours in the international press'. If 'commercial aircraft [...] with all documents in order' were to stop at Portuguese airports and then move on to African destinations, ultimately reaching 'Biafra', it was not in their power to impede this process. Additionally, Portuguese officials notified Lagos that it had assumed 'a deeply hostile attitude towards Portugal, so it should not be surprising for [the] Portuguese Government to maintain strict neutrality'.¹³

Despite efforts to shield neutrality claims using international instruments, growing scrutiny of the increase in flight traffic between Portuguese airports and Biafra within the foreign press blunted the desired calming effect of this manoeuvre. Rumours about Biafrans establishing a delegation in Lisbon increased levels of disquiet. Defining a robust policy of discretion while fostering a promising relationship with Biafrans and maintaining trade with Nigeria became imperative.¹⁴ By the end of August, João Hall Themido, the Director of Political Affairs within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, met with the Biafran representative, recommending restraint apropos their association.

Both parties understood the benefits and drawbacks the relationship entailed. The sharing of the Catholic faith has been advanced as a motivation for Biafrans to settle in Lisbon, as the common religious bond was expected to guarantee a better understanding of their cause.¹⁵ Nonetheless, the presence in the city of Hank Wharton, whose charter company became the primary vehicle for moving resources to Biafra, and the willingness of Portuguese officials to facilitate the use of airbases – particularly São Tomé, because of its favourable geographical position – constituted two other relevant factors. As did urgency. In an interview with *Transition* magazine, Chinua Achebe, a prominent intellectual and Biafran diplomat at the time, acknowledged that any association with an imperial state was problematic. Nevertheless, the Biafrans' survival imperative, as he saw it, constituted a higher motive: 'I am not interested in what motives Portugal may have. If the devil himself had offered his air facilities we would have taken [them], and I would have supported it. Portugal was very clever when it realised we were about to be exterminated, and said "You can land at my airport," and that, as far as I know, is the extent of Biafran association with Portugal'.¹⁶

Portuguese officials also considered the advantages and repercussions of supporting the secessionist attempt. Such support could further damage Portuguese standing in Africa on the international stage, as Portugal was already facing serious consequences from waging three wars to end its colonial presence, and Nigeria stood as one of the leading supporters of Angolan, Guinean and Mozambican liberation movements through the Liberation Committee within the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and at the United Nations. Support for a secessionist attempt in Africa based on self-determination could also bring turmoil on the domestic front, as protest movements in Portugal against the authoritarian regime and against keeping the empire through devastating wars had surfaced in 1961. Contrary to previous suggestions¹⁷, Portuguese

authorities refrained from mentioning the question of self-determination internationally. The OAU's circumscription of the right of self-determination to decolonisation processes because of African leaders' fear of a complete dismantling of the African post-colonial state system made it unrealistic to use this argument in international debates on Biafra.¹⁸ Furthermore, Lisbon's policy on the war was intended to avoid any attention. The arguments at the United Nations in October 1968 attest to the pursuit of a consistent narrative seeking to sustain the position that the Portuguese colonial system was better equipped to protect and improve the living conditions of African populations. It amalgamated developmental ideals, human rights and humanitarian arguments. Bonifácio de Almeida's statements in responding to the condemnation of Portuguese colonialism and accusations by the Nigerian delegation of providing assistance to Biafra at the General Assembly are revealing. The head of the Portuguese delegation emphasised the untruthful nature of criticisms against the oppression of colonised peoples. In doing so, he questioned the legitimacy of the Nigerian Government, based on what he termed the duty of protection:

If the protection of the lives and property of our entire population can be considered oppression, even though this is simply the right and fundamental duty of any government worthy of the name, if the tremendous efforts that the Portuguese Government deploys to ensure the swift general betterment of all our populations – if all this can be called oppression, we have to admit that words acquire a quite unique meaning for certain delegations.

Bonifácio de Almeida also resorted to the use of international instruments and played the humanitarian card. 'Portugal has always respected the general principle of freedom of transit and keeping traffic routes open through any of its territories'. Thus, the Government allowed 'medical and humanitarian supplies to reach Biafra, especially when well-known international organisations such as the International Red Cross and Caritas are interested in these shipments'. The statement was printed and contextualised in *Diário da Manhã* – the daily conservative newspaper most supportive of the Biafran cause and associated with the Catholic Church and the regime's political party *União Nacional* – in a piece concluding that 'from these and other examples, we can see that the complaints and accusations do not represent the facts and consequently the continuous allegations against Portugal do not have the slightest value'.¹⁹ The Biafran crisis served both international interests and domestic propaganda.

Portuguese authorities also contemplated the economic and political opportunities presented by cooperation. Enabling the use of airports and harbours for the shipment of a variety of goods, including military equipment, provided a response to recent international moves seeking to isolate Portugal diplomatically and economically in order to persuade Lisbon to respect the right of colonised peoples to self-determination and cease conflicts aimed at ending colonial rule. In 1963, the member states of the OAU unanimously approved resolutions imposing an economic embargo and a ban on shipping lines and aircraft, and severing diplomatic relations with Portugal. The UN followed suit in 1966, approving a resolution with the same purpose, less the cutting of diplomatic ties. Establishing aerial links with Biafra made it possible to breach the embargoes imposed on both parties. During the war, planes carrying military equipment to Biafra returned with commodities (copper, lead, zinc and rubber) to feed the Portuguese market. Although they were exempt from taxation, international relief shipments also boosted the Portuguese economy. The prospect of a future independent Biafran state supporting the Portuguese stance in Africa was also relevant in decision-making. A letter of appreciation from Ojukwu mentioning the 'great people of Portugal [...] long tradition of association with the African [c]ontinent [and] the most hopeful thing about our present contact [being] that it affords us all [...] an opportunity for a full understanding of our peoples and policies', and reports by the Governor of São Tomé on the Biafran leaders' positive image of the island's development, the 'evolutionary status of its population and the absence of racial discrimination' tallied with the Portuguese imperial narrative and secured a mutually beneficial relationship, on the Biafran side also.²⁰

On the international front, Portugal refuted criticism from NATO countries²¹, namely the United States, associating its intervention with colonial interests and pressures by stressing that the Government had no direct link with the war effort. No national vessels or aircraft travelled to Biafra, especially those carrying military equipment. International civil aviation companies of Belgian, South African, and Rhodesian origin brought significant resources to Portuguese airports²², and the Biafran delegation negotiated all arrangements directly with private charter companies or arms dealers of foreign or Portuguese nationality. In October 1967, Nigerian accusations stating that Portugal was Biafra's primary arms supplier surfaced in the international press. Although they were vehemently repudiated, the allegations coincided with the first secret negotiations with Portuguese companies for exports of arms, ammunition and other military equipment.²³ Shipments from South Africa, another major arms supplier at the time, and with interests aligned with the Portuguese, followed colonial routes, departing from Angola or São Tomé to the Biafran territory. Portugal also maintained that the presence of Biafran representatives in Portuguese territories was no different from the missions they carried out in New York, London, Paris, Bonn or Rome, denying that the Biafran delegation in Lisbon existed or constituted the centre of a diplomatic operation in Europe. Furthermore, authorities argued that they refrained from applying pressure to discuss the conflict in international forums – pressure which was applied by several Western states, in line with Biafra's attempts to internationalise the conflict – thus maintaining strict neutrality.²⁴

This combination of pragmatism and discretion allowed for rapid adaptation to developments in the war. After the Nigerian Federal Government counter-offensive in the Autumn of 1967, Portugal diversified its intervention. In addition to facilitating the circulation of personnel and military equipment, Lisbon provided diplomatic counsel to Biafran leaders. In several instances, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs instructed Biafrans on dealing with Western and African authorities to aggregate support. Communication facilities were installed before and after the taking of Port Harcourt in May 1968. The Portuguese national mint (*Casa da Moeda*) produced Biafran stamps and currency circulation was facilitated, improving the flow of resources to and within Biafra and promoting affirmation of the secessionist Government. From 1968, Portugal was also engaged in the humanitarian response to the Biafran crisis by enabling and cooperating with the operations of humanitarian organisations on São Tomé and through direct liaison with Biafran officials. Through this wide-ranging intervention, covering the sectors of defence, foreign relations, economics, finance, administration and welfare, Portuguese officials enabled Biafran leaders to externally project the image that it was able to function as a state and domestically sustain that capacity.

Portugal was not the only Western European state to support Biafra's secessionism despite not recognising the Republic of Biafra. This strategy was also applied by France. The similarities and contrasts between the policies of the two countries show, on the one hand, a common effort to maintain international and regional influence associated with colonial rule – in the Portuguese case to legitimise the continued existence of the colonial system, and in the French case to sustain Paris' influence in the post-colonial order. On the other hand, they reveal how coexisting colonial and post-colonial contexts were crucial in defining their humanitarian engagements. De Gaulle's Government attempted to project its influence in Africa through favoured relationships with former French colonies. French *grandeur* followed, in this case, the regional interests of Ivory Coast and Gabon. Like Portugal, France had a diversified clandestine intervention in the conflict through arms supply, economic support, cultural extension policies and direct humanitarian aid. Unlike Lisbon, Paris's humanitarian efforts were embedded in an overt policy framed as the Biafrans' right to self-determination.²⁵ As the following sections will show, Portuguese humanitarian engagements were embedded in a policy of discretion and control to protect the regime. The Government's association with humanitarianism was carefully managed to counter anti-colonial criticism and make the regime more palatable internationally.

São Tomé: the 'lifeline' to Biafra

From the autumn of 1967 until the end of the war, the Nigerian Federal Forces consistently reduced Biafran territory, despite critical periods of resistance, reinforcing the blockade with the taking of Port Harcourt in May 1968. Reports of thousands of civilians perishing daily from hunger surfaced during the winter of 1967–68 as the conflict assumed the tenor of a total war. At the same time, humanitarian organisations and religious actors – the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Vatican – invested in establishing humanitarian corridors, raising international awareness about the plight of civilians and attempting to mediate a peaceful resolution to the conflict. Repeated unsuccessful attempts to reach secessionist territory from Fernando Pó encouraged the possibility that São Tomé might be used for humanitarian operations, since flights carrying military equipment had been using the island to breach the blockade. This section explores the establishment of the São Tomé humanitarian airlift, highlighting the perspectives, motives and debates raised by political and humanitarian actors in decision-making processes and discussing its characterisation as the 'lifeline' to Biafra.

The processes establishing and consolidating the São Tomé airlift show the adaptation capacity of voluntary organisations, the range of different ways in which they employed humanitarian diplomacy, and how the intermingling of humanitarian and military action was dealt with. In early 1968, the commitment by the international community and by voluntary organisations to relieve the starvation crisis in Biafra took different directions. On the one side, the ICRC, the WCC and the Vatican were dedicated to unblocking humanitarian corridors while trying to mediate a resolution to the conflict. The ICRC faced the challenge of safeguarding compliance with International Humanitarian Law (IHL) even though the Geneva Conventions were not applicable in domestic conflicts. The Biafrans' dire situation prompted the ICRC to prioritise securing humanitarian channels and reshape its narratives to overcome IHL limitations.²⁶ The WCC followed suit, viewing the ICRC's neutrality policy as the best chance of guaranteeing a successful humanitarian operation in Nigerian- and Biafran-controlled areas. However, the belligerents' inability to reach a reconciliation in achieving consensus on humanitarian policies opened a window for voluntary organisations to make use of the clandestine route through São Tomé. Whereas the ICRC discredited São Tomé due to the island's use for the sending weapons to the secessionist party²⁷, the Vatican commenced efforts to guarantee that Caritas Internationalis could reach Biafrans through Portuguese facilities. In the following months, other faith-based organisations followed the same path.

Diplomatic channels and religious networks were fundamental in negotiating humanitarian airlifts from Portuguese airports. Caritas Internationalis worked with the Portuguese embassy in the Vatican, while national branches guaranteed that facilities and visas were made available through Caritas Portugal. After Father Byrne and Father Dorian secured the first humanitarian flight from Lisbon to Biafra in March, the German Protestant umbrella organisation Das Diakonisches Werk began negotiations with Portuguese authorities through the German-speaking Lutheran congregation in Lisbon, headed by Pastor Kühl. German diplomats also facilitated discussions for the German Caritas-Das Diakonisches Werk joint action in São Tomé. They assisted in securing authorisation for resource storage in Lisbon and ship docking in São Tomé in April. Diplomatic channels were likewise the primary mechanism in authorising the Scandinavian umbrella organisation Nordchurchaid's relief effort in the following summer.²⁸

With clearance from Portugal, faith-based organisations contacted Hank Wharton directly to negotiate flight arrangements, as mercenary pilots were the only ones breaching the blockade. The precedent set by Caritas and its networking in Lisbon and Nigeria were fundamental to subsequent arrangements. For instance, Das Diakonisches Werk met with Pastor Kühl, Father Dorian and Biafran leaders to start its operation. Helmut Reuschle, a WCC delegate, did the same a fortnight later, after the first WCC-ICRC flight had been denied entrance to Biafra from Fernando Pó.

In the following months, the WCC chartered eleven flights for the dispatchment of resources building up in Lisbon resulting from Biafran and joint Catholic-WCC appeals. What gave these actors the motivation to cooperate with mercenaries and an international quasi-pariah state was a moral imperative to act²⁹, the urge to reach the unreachable.

As Desgrandchamps argues, humanitarian relief on the ground was structured based on two aspects: the presence of or direct links with actors *in situ* and competition between humanitarian actors.³⁰ These aspects were also present in the establishment of the airlift. Inter-organisational networks in Lisbon and direct contact with Portuguese and Biafran officials allowed for a rapid consolidation of the operation and the emancipation of voluntary organisations from international relief structures involved in conflict mediation. Caritas Internationalis and Das Diakonisches Werk moved away from cooperation arrangements with the ICRC and the WCC. The latter also diversified their modus operandi by using Portuguese facilities to reach Biafra and OAU channels to influence conflict mediation and negotiate humanitarian corridors when the ICRC fell short in this task.³¹ Competition among organisations was also evident in securing transportation in Lisbon. Helmut Reuschle's account of previous contacts between Das Diakonisches Werk and Portuguese officials attests to the frustration he felt with that organisation's anticipation and takeover of the WCC's functions. As Reuschle put it, Das Diakonisches Werk's independent act to assist Biafrans put the WCC in a difficult position, 'particularly since I understand the Diakonisches Werk considers this aid part of its contribution to our appeal[. This] attitude at this point does not seem to be what I would consider a common ecumenical strategy'.³² Caritas Internationalis delegates also created suspicion among Portuguese authorities about the ICRC and representatives from other organisations operating in São Tomé, leading the Governor to conclude at a certain point that Caritas preferred having the monopoly on aid.³³

Portuguese motivations were also many and varied. The regime's association with the Catholic faith might have influenced Portuguese acquiescence, but the rapid proliferation of organisations involved attests to consideration by the authorities of the positive impacts of the relief operation. The fact that this was acquiescence and not a steadfast commitment is relevant for unravelling the Portuguese rationale. Maintaining the clandestine route for delivery of weapons required discretion and strict control over the humanitarian operation. The Portuguese authorities were pre-occupied at all times with supervising information disclosure and logistical procedures for storage and inspection, and with monitoring every flight plan. There was clear discomfort with the international attention that relief action brought to São Tomé – potentially conveying criticism of the authoritarian colonial regime – with respect to the extensive broadcasting of the relief action as part of the mediatisation strategy employed by the organisations involved to engage international public opinion. The vast numbers of international journalists accompanying humanitarian convoys in the Portuguese colony and Biafra drove continuous reviews of media reports to determine whether these reflected a positive or negative image of the regime. Relief workers and press correspondents were also put under surveillance by the Portuguese secret police, who were tasked with following their steps and gathering information about their contacts.³⁴

Nevertheless, the positive outcome of the mediatisation campaign gradually turned the minds of the Portuguese authorities. The country's association with the humanitarian endeavour was clear in favourable worldwide media accounts and letters of appreciation from multiple entities, ranging from the Papacy to diplomatic delegations, representatives of associations and the occasional ordinary citizen. Moreover, the relief effort provided an opportunity to counter anti-colonial criticism by promoting an image of benevolence and humanity. This is not to say that it was only geopolitical strategies that galvanised the Portuguese authorities. 'Humanitarian purposes' emerge as a constant justification in their statements for facilitating logistical processes, allowing tax exemption, unblocking political impasses, and engaging in specific humanitarian initiatives. Since the Second World War, Portugal had adopted and adapted international repertoires in vogue at the time, transforming anti-colonial arguments based on human rights into tools that refuted international criticism.³⁵ The idea of a common humanity, related to Christian thought and evoked

to sustain a moral imperative to save Biafran lives – which also comprised a ‘hierarchical relationship between [Western] donors and their object of compassion’ associated with the legacies of colonialism³⁶ – blended perfectly with the paternalistic ideological construct of multiracialism as the ethos of Portuguese society to legitimise colonial rule. As the Minister of Foreign Affairs stated a year before in an essay upholding Portuguese foreign policy, ‘multiracialism’ was the ‘most perfect and daring expression of human brotherhood and sociological progress’.³⁷ While the argument served the regime’s resilience domestically and internationally, the Biafran crisis provided the opportunity to show the world the extent of Portuguese benevolence when few states committed to the humanitarian effort.

From mid-1968 until the end of the war, the São Tomé airlift became known as the main ‘lifeline’ to Biafra in international media and humanitarian reports, because of its almost uninterrupted transportation of humanitarian resources. An analysis of the actions of the Portuguese authorities and the relief workers shows the number of different ways this expression was employed. Although it emerged against a humanitarian background, the essential factor underlying its value was the capacity to breach the blockade, allowing resources to reach Biafran territory. Keeping Biafra alive meant not only feeding the starving civilian population but also sustaining the *idea* of Biafra, which included the delivery of military equipment and other resources. The *idea* of Biafra thrilled political and humanitarian actors – many of whom were influenced by the propaganda from Biafran leaders containing accusations of a Nigerian genocidal campaign³⁸, while others operated by interweaving the crisis with aspirations of self-determination, respect for human rights, or personal identification after years spent working on the ground.

Barriers to reaching the Biafran population and entanglements between humanitarian and military aid in the São Tomé airlift posed various challenges to humanitarian agents and resulted in a series of adaptations to safeguard the viability of the operation. In the first half of 1968, international attention to the humanitarian crisis and ensuing donations increased considerably. Negotiations by the ICRC and the WCC to secure humanitarian corridors achieved scant results. Consequently, the demand for clandestine routes through São Tomé increased considerably, transforming the Portuguese colony into a hub for voluntary organisations. However, obstacles in guaranteeing safe passage persisted. The accumulation of resources and limited frequency of transport operations because of the restricted number of aircraft available and difficulties in landing at the improvised Uli airstrip after the taking of Port Harcourt by Nigerian forces led German organisations to reinforce the fleet. Nevertheless, dependency on mercenaries’ availability and lack of coordination hampered efforts to increase the tonnage dispatched. It also caused disquiet for the Portuguese authorities in São Tomé. The Governor, António Jorge da Silva Sebastião, who oversaw operations and acted as a middleman between the ground and the decision-making authorities in Portugal – the Overseas Ministry, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the President of the Council of Ministers –, met humanitarian relief agents regularly and reported daily to Lisbon for necessary policymaking adjustments. Inoperative flights fuelled Silva Sebastião’s distrust of Wharton’s pilots, whom he suspected were also subsidised by Nigeria. His primary concern was that ‘the relief programme’s success or failure [was] largely dependent on the captain’s loyalty’.³⁹ The response to this problem was provided by Nordchurchaid. The organisation strengthened the fleet with larger capacity planes and experienced Swedish crew. Furthermore, it was open to running its operation with all entities interested. On 12 August, Nordchurchaid planes began transporting German Caritas supplies to Uli.⁴⁰ The cooperative effort with German organisations and Caritas Internationalis was formally established in Malmö. By the end of the month, an average of four relief flights per night was recorded.

Inter-organisational cooperation guaranteed greater operational independence from political actors and from Wharton. Despite the weekly meetings to brief the Governor, the Portuguese authorities had little involvement in the airlift. Their role was to facilitate and supervise the sending of resources, ensuring that humanitarian agents had little impact on São Tomé’s population

and that weapons storage and shipping remained hidden from the foreign press. Nordchurchaid's initiative also allowed the churches to dissociate themselves from the business of the mercenaries, as the crew, storage facilities and workers were independently contracted. From September to December 1968, the São Tomé airlift guaranteed six to ten relief flights per night (each supporting ten tonnes of cargo), thus enabling the churches in Biafra to resume their activities in hospitals, refugee camps and feeding centres established to combat malnutrition. The diverse range of organisations contributing to the humanitarian effort also expanded considerably, but difficulties accessing the Uli airstrip remained, leading to strife, discouragement and frustration. These two factors drove new adaptations. In November, Joint Church Aid (JCA) was born after a meeting in Rome with representatives of organisations on the ground. The enlarged umbrella organisation (composed of 33 faith-based and secular organisations) planned on chartering new, larger capacity planes to increase operational efficiency. This was accomplished from January 1969 onwards, with JCA operating on average 322 flights per month until the end of the operation, which became even more significant after the ICRC terminated the Fernando Pó airbridge in June 1969.

Clashes between humanitarian and military aid were noticeable during the months of adaptation towards operational independence and consolidation. Such problems emerged primarily in critical situations. One was the July-August 1968 standstill after the Nigerian reinforcement of anti-aerial combat. The Governor of São Tomé worried about whether the humanitarian operation could succeed if it relied on Wharton's loyalties but also about the desperate situation of the Biafrans and their dependence on Portuguese arms shipments. He did not dissociate one type of assistance from the other, putting pressure on Lisbon in terms of its commitment to their cause. Even after the French initiated military and humanitarian support through Libreville, Silva Sebastião pointed to accounts from Biafrans of its 'insignificant' impact: 'they count on us only and only from us do they expect the resolution of their problems'.⁴¹

The 'lifeline' to Biafra also acquired different meanings among relief workers who identified with the Biafran cause. In one of his daily telegrams to Lisbon, Silva Sebastião reported on the motivations of the representatives of Caritas Internationalis. 'My general impression from the conversation is that while the Church is primarily excited by humanitarian ideas, its qualified representatives cannot hide their political passion [...] a possible Biafran victory thrills them intensely and constitutes what they aspire to more than anything else'.⁴² Clashes between humanitarian and military action also led to a separation of relief organisations from those that advocated for increasing military aid. In October 1968, Das Diakonisches Werk terminated its cooperation with Gustav von Rosen – Nordchurchaid's Chief of Operations, who had been the first pilot to breach the blockade in August after Nigeria's reinforcement of anti-aerial power. The German organisation justified this divorce on the basis of humanitarian principles. Yet, its argument also acknowledges the feelings the conflict stirred up: 'The separation from von Rosen took place under mutual agreement in order to pertain to our neutrality after he had said openly in a press conference how important it is to bring also arms and ammunition to Biafra besides food and medicines. When one is confronted daily with the terrible events in the war areas one can easily reach the point to make such statements'.⁴³

The effort to promote international awareness and engagement through an unprecedented media campaign fuelled by missionaries and Biafran leaders led to extraordinary scrutiny of the operation in São Tomé, raising questions about the independence of the relief operation.⁴⁴ The Biafran propaganda war enmeshed the Biafran political project within a global humanitarian event.⁴⁵ Accusations regarding the mixing of relief and military cargoes soon surfaced. The organisations involved repeatedly refuted such allegations and promoted a policy of impartial aircraft inspection and solutions to separate humanitarian corridors from armament supply. The communications between the Governor of São Tomé and Lisbon also attest to the separation of military and humanitarian resources. After Wharton's dismissal in September 1968, Biafran officials appropriated several aircraft on the island to maintain the flow of military equipment.

These flights were separated from relief flights, managed independently by Nordchurchaid and later by JCA. An analysis of humanitarian flight cargoes demonstrates that these flights transported resources other than those traditionally regarded as relief – foodstuffs, medicine and related items – and which could be adapted to military purposes. However, resource deviation practices and diversity of humanitarian resources were not a unique feature of the Biafran situation. As in other conflicts, an assortment of goods constituted relief: petrol and parts to ensure the operation of aeroplanes and vehicles in the area, aluminium plates and other materials intended for the repair of the Uli airstrip, agricultural machinery, tools for development projects, among other examples – all were part of the humanitarian operation.

Through the mediatization of the crisis, non-State actors, mostly with religious backgrounds, altered the humanitarian landscape and, moreover, felt the impact of their exposure strategies. Others insisted that the operation be terminated. August Lindt, the coordinator of the ICRC mission in Biafra raised concerns about the impact of the São Tomé airlift. According to WCC delegates, Lindt did 'not look kindly on such operations. [They constituted] symbolic assistance with no other effect than to give moral support to the Biafrans and satisfy worried public opinion. He also says that these exploits harm the negotiations for the airlift'.⁴⁶ The multiple meanings of the São Tomé 'lifeline' to Biafra were exploited by both warring parties, and the transformation of a military conflict into a humanitarian spectacle contributed to the delegitimation of relief initiatives.

Conversely, the organisations involved in the São Tomé airlift contributed to debates about reforming humanitarian action, specifically about the inadequacy of IHL instruments in this context. Reform within the humanitarian sector is frequently tied to the strife between the ICRC and French Red Cross volunteers who later formed *Médecins sans Frontières*, despite recent accounts of a reformist impetus within the International Committee.⁴⁷ This dispute was not limited to the organisations within the Red Cross Movement. During the summer of 1968, debates between Das Diakonisches Werk and the WCC on the latter's application of the ICRC neutrality policy led the Bishop of Bonn to state that the principle of state integrity (namely supporting Nigeria's position) should be secondary to that of saving the Biafran people, advocating for humanitarian intervention and the need for international instruments to cover domestic conflicts. In his words: 'When a people or a section of it is threatened by physical destruction through extermination and hunger, moral reasons require that the preservation of the unity of a state take[s] second place.[...] International law and foreign policy have to be adjusted to the new situations and tasks'.⁴⁸

Finally, the airlift launched debates among the organisations on the ground and the WCC about the contemporary and past association of the humanitarians with colonialism; a point historians have been calling attention for.⁴⁹ Although they maintained a certain degree of independence in airlift operations, the cooperation of the voluntary organisations with a colonial power was massively criticised by sectors within the WCC. They warned that the suffering of Biafrans could not be distinguished from peoples of recently independent African countries, whose distress was related to colonial legacies. Moreover, this suffering could not be dissociated from the struggle of the people of South African and Portuguese colonies: 'Whatever our motives, and however innocent and pure we imagine them to be, we carry the burden of a history and of involvement in institutions of power, which renders ambiguous even our works of compassion and mercy'. Voluntary organisations needed to realise that other Africans saw the Portuguese support for Biafra as a 'highly cynical move' to restore its international political capital.⁵⁰

These debates did not shift the resolve of relief workers wishing to operate in the Portuguese colony. Nevertheless, they show that adaptations and transformations within the aid sector in the 1960s encompassed conflicting debates about the entanglements between humanitarianism and colonialism and how religious actors were concerned about the ways in which colonial legacies framed humanitarian action in Global South geographies.

‘São Tomé’s miracle is Biafra’s tragedy’: Investing in and gaining from humanitarian initiatives

Whereas Portugal’s role in the humanitarian airlift was one of facilitating logistical procedures, storage of supplies and quality supervision, the direct participation of the Portuguese authorities, humanitarian organisations and civilians in other relief projects and initiatives provides a broader perspective of the country’s engagement in the crisis, and how it employed a form of *symbolic humanitarianism*. Unlike most Western experiences, Portuguese civil society was underexposed to massive humanitarian campaigns. The authoritarian regime’s censorship apparatus assured the detachment of Portuguese public opinion from uncontrolled forms of civic engagement. Nevertheless, circulation of information about the war encouraged grassroots initiatives, managed mainly by the Portuguese Red Cross (PRC). The Government and the PRC ran various humanitarian undertakings, directly cooperating with Biafrans. Portuguese officials also helped with unblocking rescue projects and influenced the observance by Biafrans of humanitarian standards. This section explores these many endeavours, examining negotiations between political and aid sectors, as well as the arguments evoked to achieve humanitarian purposes. It also scrutinises how Portugal benefited from humanitarian investments, particularly in the São Tomé colony.

In the first half of 1968, starving Biafran refugees, predominantly children, became the focus of humanitarian campaigns. Images of skeletal children spread swiftly across Western newspapers, magazines and TV programmes, in what became the first ‘live broadcast’ humanitarian crisis. ‘Spectacles of suffering’ altered perceptions about post-colonial Africa and its ‘problems’, leading to the prevalence of notions of victimhood to bolster humanitarian engagement.⁵¹ Despite the frenetic humanitarian activity in Lisbon and São Tomé, the regime’s censorship and local events prevented broader public exposure to the crisis. Unlike the French strategy⁵², aid campaigns were discouraged by the Portuguese Government, and images of Biafran children were uncommon in the media, which, by the summer of 1968, was flooded with news about António de Oliveira Salazar’s hospitalisation and slow demise. Apprehension regarding attention about the extent of intervention associated with the regime’s containment of civil society defined Portuguese policy. For governmental officials, the international impact of their association with the relief endeavour – propelled by the mediatisation of the crisis and used as a tool of humanitarian diplomacy by voluntary organisations – was undoubtedly more relevant, as it fostered a positive image in Western public opinion.

Even so, voluntary donations were recorded, primarily from groups with Catholic backgrounds inspired by *Diário da Manhã*. Although it did not showcase Portuguese humanitarian involvement, the newspaper influenced public opinion in supporting Biafra. Donations were channelled and managed by the PRC, which collected high-protein foodstuffs from Portuguese farmers and at least 10,854.70 escudos, accompanied by messages referencing Christianity, the fundamental right to life, and apologies for the meagre amount.⁵³ These donations reflected grassroots initiatives in local parishes, schools and cooperatives in a country where developing economic indicators contrasted with high poverty and illiteracy rates. The PRC sent the donations to the League of Red Cross Societies and the ICRC, adding to the Government’s symbolic contribution to the latter’s appeal. In the ICRC’s donations balance sheet to 30 November 1968, the Portuguese Government had channelled 161.50 Swiss francs through the PRC, the smallest amount among all donations by a large margin, but just enough to sustain its neutral stance.⁵⁴ Cooperation with the ICRC was also extended to identifying missing persons in liaison with the Biafran delegation in Lisbon.

The Government invested in targeted humanitarian initiatives in close cooperation with Biafran officials. Assistance to injured Biafran soldiers and medics was provided through liaison between the Biafran delegation, the PRC and the various ministries. Direct allocation of medicine and foodstuffs to the Biafran delegation was recorded, although information on the resources reaching the destination was nebulous on occasions. Nonetheless, cooperation between the PRC and

the Biafran Red Cross divorced from the ICRC – as suggested by the Biafrans – was circumvented because it did not comply with provisions regulating the Red Cross Movement.⁵⁵

Although they did not hamper their mutually prolific relationship, the Portuguese authorities often expressed apprehension about the motivations and behaviour of the Biafran officers. Even though they granted Biafran delegations in Lisbon and São Tomé freedom to conduct their affairs, on certain occasions the Portuguese Government interfered to limit actions detrimental to State interests or to influence Biafran leaders to comply with humanitarian provisions. In the spring of 1969, unsuccessful pushes by aid organisations to build an airstrip exclusively for humanitarian purposes and organise resource inspection by impartial actors took place at the same time as the accumulation of 'rotting' supplies in São Tomé and accounts of resource deviation in Biafra surfaced in the press.⁵⁶ Considerable territorial losses in that period contributed to the exasperation of the Biafran leaders. In late April, reports on 'Biafran authorities demanding payment of high tariffs from relief organisations' to land at Uli arrived on the Governor's desk. Concerned about the 'serious consequences' that suspension of relief could entail, the Governor appealed to Lisbon to intervene to remove the tariffs, hinting that disclosure of the official documents attesting to the demand 'would be likely to substantially change public opinion' about Biafrans.⁵⁷ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded immediately, and a tariff ban came into force in May.

Creating negative impacts on international public opinion was a tool that Portugal employed to influence decision-making by Biafrans to abide by humanitarian standards at a time when a certain malaise among relief workers started to surface, associated with disputed claims of genocide and the hindering of relief shipments. These included the case of the imprisonment and sentencing to death of oil company workers from *Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi* found guilty of cooperating with Nigerian forces in early May. Although several actors were involved in their release, Portuguese archives show the important contribution of Ivory Coast, Gabonese and Portuguese officials. On 15 May, Silva Sebastião sent a letter to secessionist leader Ojukwu referring to the '[w]orldwide repercussions [...] of the imprisonment of foreigners by Biafran officials'. He pressured Ojukwu indirectly, stating, 'there will be nothing to fear for their safety and even for their prompt release since Biafra would not miss this opportunity to show the World once more the high respect that the life of any human being deserves'.⁵⁸ Delays in the release led voluntary organisations in São Tomé to threaten a suspension of the airlift and to 'strongly pressure' the Governor to 'exert all my possible influence for a prompt solution'.⁵⁹ Lisbon agreed, asking Silva Sebastião to 'take steps [...] to grant the 18 workers tried and convicted a measure of clemency and release'. He was advised to follow the stance of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, drawing attention to 'the great damage the sentence would cause to the sympathy that Biafra had achieved at great cost in international opinion', and to help Biafrans understand that this 'step to support Europeans [...] would also be taken with the same commitment if they were citizens of an African country'. Finally, he was advised to inform Ojukwu that 'Biafra's position was already protected by the trial and sentence, [and therefore] the clemency that he could now grant would have great political effect'.⁶⁰ The Governor entrusted the Bishop of Port Harcourt, who was in São Tomé, with the task of delivering the message and joining the Ivory Coast- and Gabonese-led negotiations in Biafra, and sent another personal letter to the secessionist leader. Portugal's influence is reflected in Ojukwu's statement on the prisoners' release. He mentioned the 'granting of mercy' to the prisoners and his 'action [being] influenced by humanitarian considerations and respect [for] the sanctity of human life'. He drew attention 'to the events connected with the release of these men – a situation from which all Africa should draw a lesson'. He criticised foreign encouragement of 'Africans destroying fellow African lives', demanding a diplomatic solution to the conflict and the cessation of African bloodshed. Finally, one of the factors leading to the decision was 'the image of our country and that of our friends' – among them Portugal, which Ojukwu thanked for its support and understanding.⁶¹

Portuguese humanitarian initiatives were also conducted in São Tomé, with the commencement of a children's rescue programme to treat Biafran infants in a critical condition. Saving Biafran children was the focus of humanitarian campaigns and a central factor in narratives about the war and the crisis. The programme originated from an offer from the Governor to the Biafran leadership. Silva Sebastião hoped to accommodate a thousand children on the island, but Lisbon curtailed his expectations. A pilot project was established for fifty children suffering mainly from kwashiorkor and marasmus. The Governor's initiative overcame barriers imposed by the Biafrans for projects to treat children in countries that had recognised Biafra: first in Gabon, then in Ivory Coast.⁶² In a telegram to the Foreign Ministry, Governor Silva Sebastião reported that the children's arrival 'caused a great furore among humanitarian organisations', whose proposals to develop similar programmes had met with 'negative responses' from the secessionists.⁶³ Negotiations around the programme reflected close cooperation between the Government and voluntary organisations and the impact of the international spread of the crisis. The Committee for the Evacuation, Treatment and Recovery of Child War Victims was created under the Governor's chairmanship, and Das Diakonisches Werk and Caritas Internationalis cooperated with Portuguese authorities to plan a cohesive programme, including transportation, emergency treatment, inoculation and convalescence until these patients were fully recovered. Immediately after the first group's arrival on the island, voluntary organisations pressured the Governor to extend the programme, committing to fund the operation. Silva Sebastião questioned their capacity to meet the necessary requirements, but the colony alone could not cater to the extension. The international repercussions of a negative decision also needed to be considered. Lisbon approved, citing the humanitarian nature of the endeavour.⁶⁴ By the end of the month, Caritas Internationalis and Das Diakonisches Werk had agreed to fund infrastructural improvements and additional personnel, and subsidise an amount of USD 3/child/day.⁶⁵ By March 1969, São Tomé had the capacity to care for two hundred children at any given time. Overall, the programme supported 437 children, with a significant success rate. Compared to children's rescue programmes in other destinations, the numbers in São Tomé might seem meagre, but the significance of this effort relied on the unblocking of such initiatives by meeting the requirements of the Biafran leaders in terms of evacuation and repatriation conditions, and humanitarian standards for rescue programmes. Ensuring a model programme that guaranteed each child's care and interests (return safely to their homes) also fostered a benevolent and competent image of Portugal, one that supported its arguments for the continued existence of the colonial regime. The authorities resisted pressure at all times for mass evacuations to certify 'all care would be given to [them and to] avoid a true catastrophe'.⁶⁶ They also insisted on repatriation, refusing initiatives that planned to send children to Europe or other African destinations during or after recovery. Low mortality rates (4.5%), remaining in an African environment, care by Igbo personnel, and immediate repatriation after recovery all met the desired conditions for children's rescue programmes resulting from discussions conducted at the time among WCC, Caritas and ICRC officials.⁶⁷

Apart from their symbolism in projecting a benevolent image of the Portuguese state, the children's rescue programme and the airlift brought indirect benefits to Portugal, and particularly to São Tomé. Like other Portuguese colonies, São Tomé and Príncipe saw significant transformations during the late colonial period associated with ideals for modernisation and international pressures to end abusive labour dynamics.⁶⁸ Targeted development policies and the introduction of the labour inspectorate contributed to improving working conditions.⁶⁹ However, the colony's insularity, its dependence on the rural sector and the regime's resistance to structural change consolidated the permanent hardships experienced by the majority in urban and rural settings. So, when the humanitarian airlift started, one of the Governor's primary concerns was its impact on the local population (60,000 Africans and 2,000 Europeans). Although they persisted, fears of turmoil were slowly allayed as the airlift brought new opportunities for employment and prosperity. The quiet island's transformation into an international transit centre increased employment in the dockyards and airport and the few hotels and restaurants earned unforeseen revenues.

Infrastructural improvements funded by the Government and voluntary organisations – airport and harbour enlargements, road repair, the construction of an additional ward in the central hospital, among others – contributed to a boost for the local economy. Although most warehouses for resource storage were made available free of charge by government bodies such as the Overseas Agricultural Company or the Overseas National Bank and private owners, many local companies profited from advantageous storage, transport and loading and unloading agreements. For example, the billing statement for Das Diakonisches Werk from January 1969 until May 1970 declared more than 19,000,000 escudos spent on unloading costs, customs, transport to warehouses, warehouse contractors, rental, and transport and loading to aircraft and ships.⁷⁰ Housing for humanitarian agents, aircraft staff and press correspondents and other maintenance expenses fuelled an economy dependent on the market flows of commodities and abusive labour dynamics. In 1968 and 1969, São Tomé reported a positive balance of payments despite falls in cocoa exports.⁷¹ As the *New York Times* reported in September 1968, 'São Tomé's miracle [was] Biafra's tragedy'⁷² – an ephemeral miracle as the increase in revenues served colonial interests rather than investments in sustained welfare and development policies. Ethnic-based social hierarchies and lack of public investment in the late colonial period concurred to the persistence of poverty and exclusion among those who sustained the cocoa plantation-based economy through their work. Although improvements in workers and their families' living conditions and access to basic education or health were registered in the early 1970s, these were majorly dependent on private investments in the plantations and insistence by state inspectors worried about international pressures for decolonisation and the effects anti-colonial wars in other colonies might have on São Tomé.⁷³

São Tomé's 'miracle' fed the Biafran civilian population, but also the colonial narrative of modernity and development that the Portuguese authorities were eager to imprint in the international arena. The Biafran crisis did not prevent condemnations of Portuguese colonialism in international forums led by the Afro-Asian block. Nonetheless, the association of Portugal with Biafra through these humanitarian endeavours became part of a successful official narrative during Salazar's last months in power and the early moments of the new Government headed by Marcello Caetano, in academic works and diplomatic channels.⁷⁴ While the Portuguese investment was fruitless in terms of the desired military outcome, Portugal benefitted from 'Biafra's tragedy' domestically and internationally by employing strategies of *symbolic humanitarianism*.

Conclusion

An analysis of the Portuguese intervention in the Nigerian-Biafran war supports the need to situate the conflict within the broader dynamics of the 1960s, encompassing concomitant colonial and post-colonial contexts so as to provide a better understanding of both geopolitical interests and humanitarian arrangements and adaptations. Perspectives addressed in French or British decolonisation chronologies might influence historical narratives discussing the breakdowns and breakthroughs created by the Biafran crisis. If we add the Portuguese case to the historical discussion of the Biafran crisis, this *moment* becomes more complex.

Despite being considered a 'minor' power in the unfolding post-Second World War dynamics, Portugal had a pivotal role in the Nigerian civil war through a multifaceted intervention that envisaged Biafra's ability to function as a state. Portuguese strategies were formulated within the regime's imperial ethos and foreign policy. While supporting Biafra, the Portuguese authorities availed themselves of international instruments, such as the 1944 Chicago Convention, to support a policy of strict neutrality. They articulated their position using Nigerian arguments on the domestic nature of the conflict, with humanitarian repertoires, using these to their advantage. Condemnations of colonialism led by the Afro-Asian block persisted, but Portuguese diplomats maintained their stance using the Biafran crisis to sustain their position in Africa. The fact that Biafrans supported Portuguese arguments in their handling of communications with Lisbon was

crucial for a mutually beneficial partnership, allowing aid recipients leverage to negotiate military, economic, diplomatic and humanitarian support.

The Portuguese case contributes to an analysis that confers a humanitarian role on State actors in the Biafran crisis, despite differences in engagement policies. As with the example of de Gaulle's Government, Portugal supported and developed humanitarian initiatives such as the children's rescue programme. Nevertheless, Portuguese engagements in relief initiatives were not defined as a State policy. Economic frailty and the regime's authoritarian imperial character shaped the Government's strategy. Conversely, their symbolic nature – in scale and projection of a benevolent image of the regime – were framed within an evolving strategy to associate the state with humanitarian values and governance. Lisbon accepted and supported a humanitarian airlift operated by voluntary organisations without direct interference. The authorities' role was to facilitate the relief operation, providing logistical support. Other commitments – contributions to the international effort and the various initiatives in Portugal and in São Tomé – also reveal an investment in the humanitarian endeavour, despite this not being framed within a general policy. While humanitarian arguments influenced the Government's reasoning, the constant concern was to avoid international scrutiny, and limited economic capacity and a policy of maintaining control over Portuguese civil society contributed to the concealment and restraint of aid projects. In this sense, Portugal's strategy – entrenched in the empire's protection – differed noticeably from the French approach – framed in a post-colonial nexus.

The Portuguese case also contrasted with other Western experiences, where the mediatization of the Biafran crisis drove substantial engagement by civil society. No humanitarian campaigns were recorded, and information about the crisis was restricted by the regime's censorship in order to avoid uncontrolled civic participation. The concomitant conflicting colonial and post-colonial dynamics of the late 1960s, shaped by resistance to and pressures for decolonisation, help explain the Portuguese authorities' restraint and how they employed humanitarian repertoires. Humanitarianism had a symbolic function, which served primarily to project an external appearance of benevolence of the regime and an image of compliance with international standards.

Negotiations between Portugal and voluntary organisations show the instruments the latter used to achieve humanitarian purposes, but also how they depended on State actors to influence decision-making processes. In establishing the São Tomé airlift, faith-based organisations used diplomatic channels and religious and humanitarian networks. Inter-organisational cooperation was crucial in consolidating the operation and guaranteeing independence from political actors and mercenaries involved with military shipments. Financial investment in the colony to guarantee the expansion of the children's rescue programme was a fundamental resource for humanitarian diplomacy. On the other hand, humanitarian arguments – and how these were reflected in international opinion – were employed by the Portuguese authorities to pressure Biafran officials to comply with humanitarian provisions. The examples of the tariff ban on relief flights and the release of the *Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi* workers show not only the Portuguese influence on the Biafran leadership but also that aid organisations relied on Portugal to meet their needs. We should therefore rethink narratives on the relevance of State-led humanitarian diplomacy during the crisis, in particular in ascertaining the ways in which political actors assisted newly established organisations in pursuing humanitarian action.

Although the quantities of resources sent were small compared to the needs of the civilian population on the ground, the São Tomé airlift was considered the 'lifeline' to Biafra because of its almost uninterrupted operation. Its success not only reflected the impact of the mediation of humanitarianism and the organisation and adaptation capacity of religious actors⁷⁵, but also drove discussion among the organisations working in São Tomé about necessary reforms in international humanitarian legal provisions and action, as well as reflection about how colonial legacies impacted humanitarian action at a time of shifting international and regional dynamics. Conflicts about the airlift operation also reveal how the personal

identification of aid workers with a cause can undermine humanitarian action. The multiple meanings of the 'lifeline' to Biafra led to the dismissal of operatives and criticism regarding the mixing of humanitarian and other resources used for military purposes. To a certain extent, relief organisations became the object of unprecedented international scrutiny, bolstered by their own investment in a mediatisation campaign that transformed a political cause into a humanitarian spectacle.

Taking this context into account, Portuguese officials' strategy – controlling the disclosure of information so as to not overexpose their multifaceted intervention and investing in small-scale humanitarian endeavours – proved to be successful in circumventing international scrutiny. Anti-colonial criticism against Portugal and the continued violent decolonisation conflicts in Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique persisted during and after the Biafran crisis. Even so, Portuguese officials managed the crisis to their own advantage, both in international spheres and for domestic gains.

Notes

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