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## Interview: Chief C.O. Ojukwu

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# We have achieved a national compromise

*This interview was conducted with Chief Ojukwu in London on June 11. A delegate to Nigeria's National Constitutional Conference, Chief Ojukwu was the military leader of the 1967 Biafra War. For a previous interview with him, see EIR, Dec. 16, 1994, p. 58.*

**EIR:** You have been a member of the Constitutional Conference in Nigeria, which has just concluded its deliberations. Could you tell us about the results of this conference, what is your judgment about its success?

**Ojukwu:** It is somewhat premature for me to start giving results at this point in time, because we actually went in to draft a Constitution. We have drafted one, which is being printed now, and we are going to present it to the government. Naturally it would be after that, that we would be able to tell you the results, because we have no executive powers, we only can make recommendations to the government.

As far as the work itself is concerned, I am quite satisfied that a great deal of work has been done. I am satisfied that this conference started and ended in Nigeria—with the state of things, that in itself is an achievement. Then I am satisfied, looking generally over the points that have been raised and the various things we have said. We have not got a perfect solution and in any case nobody can pretend that it is only our generation that has a monopoly of wisdom for Nigeria. What we have produced is at best, I think, a national compromise. Something that will keep Nigeria together, enable us to live together and make progress. At the same time, it is a document that will enable future generations to better what we have produced. We do not expect a rigid, firm, perfect solution. It would be wrong for anybody to think in those terms.

**EIR:** Could you mention some of the concrete points that you think were achieved in your deliberations?

**Ojukwu:** Again, achievement is saying too much. We resolved during the conference that Nigeria would remain one. But we accepted that there are difficulties to that oneness. We then went ahead to design a situation, particularly the

whole question of transfer of power. This has dogged Nigeria ever since independence: how to peacefully, at the end of your mandate, hand over power to your successor? We have in that regard decided on a rotational form of Presidency, where one side of Nigeria, one half of Nigeria, would rule at one time, then be succeeded by the other side of Nigeria, with no geographical group succeeding itself. We have also set up a Constitutional Court whose task will be constantly to focus its attention on the Constitution and the Bill of Rights of our Nigerian citizens. We have tried, in all our various recommendations, to make our own suggestions justiciable, so that the citizen certainly has concrete actions he can take to rectify a situation where power has been abused.

We have looked upon our revenue generation and allocation, and we have given more emphasis to areas of derivation for revenue. We feel one of the points of friction in Nigeria is a situation in which areas find themselves to be a national cow, which somebody else milks. We have suggested a minimum percentage of any revenue accruing to the federation that must be granted back to the areas of generation and extraction. These are concrete steps. We have also recommended that schools and the entire educational system be given down to the states, so that nobody can blame anybody else for any failure in education. There are so many innovations we have made. But I must underline this, that I do not believe these are perfect solutions. But these are solutions that will prevent conflict at this time.

**EIR:** There were lots of discussions that the exit date for the military, which the conference demanded, was changed. What is the substance of this debate and why was the date changed?

**Ojukwu:** Let's make no mistake about this. I personally felt that at the time the date Jan. 1, 1996 was decided upon, it was feasible. The Constitutional Conference dragged on and we are now in June; we have not submitted the report to the government. It became in itself very unrealistic to keep to the date Jan. 1, 1996. That notwithstanding I still believe—I mean a *force majeure* could intervene, if tomorrow somebody got onto the radio and started martial music again, and "fellow countrymen and women"—it is true that it could change; but we will just be going around in the same old vicious circle. What we looked at was the practicality for peaceful change, that would give us a greater chance of stability. And we then decided, actually, contrary to what everybody is saying. In the body of our recommendations is the suggestion (recommendation) that the military government would relinquish power in 18 to 24 months at most after the report has been presented. That is actually the fact of the day.

**EIR:** How confident are you, that the recommendations of

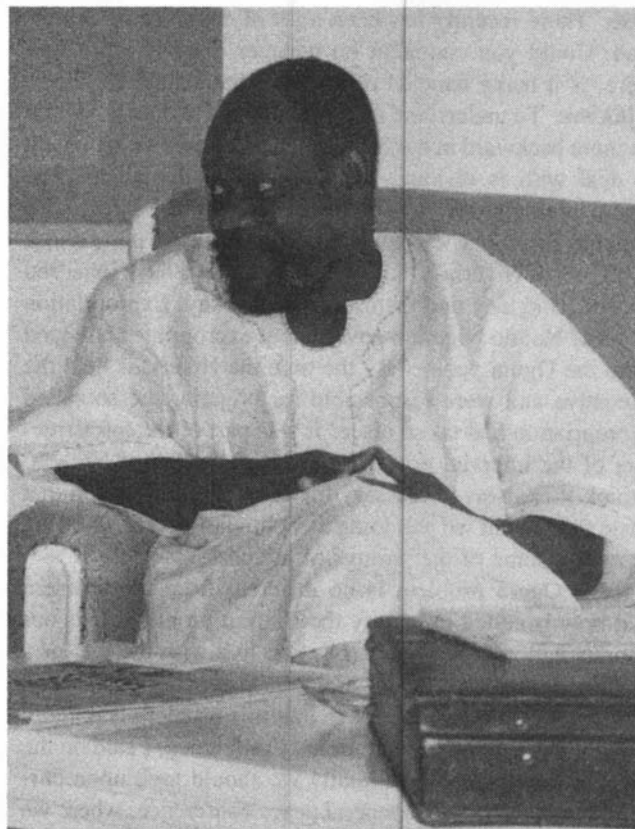
the Constitutional Conference will be accepted by the military government?

**Ojukwu:** A lot of people, when they say military government, don't give them any nuances and don't give them any color or anything. I am talking now about the Abacha military government, the one I know, the one we are now working with. I feel very confident about that particular military government. Should anything—God forbid—intervene before, then one would have to reconsider, review, and reappraise the situation. But from every indication and everything I have seen from my interaction with this particular government, I don't believe they will tinker with the recommendations. It will probably be dotting some i's and crossing some t's. For example, there was a recommendation that the Nigerian Army should be not more than 50,000 strong; that was the recommendation of the majority. I remember that my comment was quite clearly that that was almost treasonable, that you don't announce the size of your army in that form. And I am pretty certain that this will not be reflected. I hope it will not be reflected in action. I think we should, like every nation, look upon matters of defense generally always based on our needs, real needs. Today it might be nigh zero; tomorrow it might be a 100,000.

**EIR:** In the history of states, there have always been political classes, civilians who have done a lot of damage to the political process. I think also in Nigeria there are examples in which civilians can be blamed for the misfortune of the country. Do you see a danger that once the process of the political debate and the formation of political parties start, that what has been achieved could be lost in the excitement of the renewed political debate on that level?

**Ojukwu:** Very often one takes this whole business of nation-building as something you do in a classroom. You take an exam, and you pass or you fail—that sort of thing. I don't know. What I see is that a chance very soon will be given again for civilianizing the governance of Nigeria. I use the term "civilianizing" mainly to draw a distinction between the type of government we have now—everybody calls it military, but it is only military insofar as the final decision is taken by the military boss. But the entire apparatus of governance has civilians almost exclusively, except again where you have a provisional ruling council. After the presentation of our report, there will certainly be a rat race; the politicians will all be around, trampling across the land in search of votes. There will be an appearance of confusion, because there will be a great deal of activity. I don't think anybody really has the right to say "halt," because we have opted for a democratic system. We have opted to allow all shades of opinion. We have to try them out. If there is confusion, I don't think this is any reason for the process to stop.

It is in fact the same reason why, no matter how badly



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it has been said the civilians ruled, there is absolutely no justification for the military to take over. Yes, I expect, given the two years maximum that the Constitutional Conference suggested, the chances are better than average that the transition will take place more or less smoothly. Now that we raise this point, I have my own pet notion. One of the problems we have in Nigeria is that you always know the date of the national elections before you form political parties. That makes you clearly get a whole lot of conspirators who get together. You don't get politicians together. We have been doing this, and it's a mistake we have been making regularly. I would have preferred a situation where, all the time the military is in place, we should have political parties going through our various internal elections and selection before. Then the politicians and their parties are fit for presentation. I use the term "fit for presentation" in a general context, because there is nobody, and the only way you can judge a political party is, can it win an election or not? There is nothing else. I believe personally, when there is confusion, we should go ahead, and still get a government of civilians, no matter how imperfect that government might later appear.

**EIR:** There recently has been a lot of coverage of Ogoniland. Could you comment on whether there is a problem there, is it being handled right, and what should be done?

**Ojukwu:** To understand the problem, one should go a little bit more backward in our history. The situation we are trying to deal with is residual, residual from colonialism. The Ogoni problem derives completely from our contact with imperial Britain. The Ogoni people never at any point chose to be part of Nigeria—they happen to be. We have inherited Nigeria, and they find themselves in it, okay. Expropriation of land? No; no Nigerian government expropriated any land from the Ogoni people. By the time the Nigerians held the executive and were responsible for Nigeria, the so-called expropriation had taken place. It was part of the infrastructure of the imperial power for the exploitation of Nigeria. I think it is always necessary for people to understand that basic fact. What we are doing as politicians today, is trying to rectify some of the wrongs of the past.

The Ogoni problem is no different from the problem that now is called in history the Biafran problem. It is our various national groupings trying to live with the fact of a modern agglomerate state, a new nation being formed out of very many. I do not believe that this problem is unique. When I went to the Constitutional Conference, I said on the floor of the house, that actually we should look upon ourselves as delegates to a general peace conference, where we sit together with all the various injustices that we have all experienced, one way or the other, and try to iron them out in this peace conference, and try to get out of it a document, a peace treaty for Nigeria, that we hope will then stand the test of time. Now, if one sees it that way, you can not isolate one problem and say “this is the problem.”

The other thing I found on coming to London is that everybody has now begun even to twist history. There is the political problem of Ogoniland. There is no doubt about that. In the Constitutional Conference, we have tried to address it, because we think it is quite fundamental. You can never be contented, if you are living in a place where every day the oil from under your land is being siphoned out, where you have no post offices, you have no roads, you have no electricity, and your lifestyle hasn't changed for the past 50 years. You are bound to resent it. We looked at this and we found that, only recently, the percentage of funds derived from oil which is taken from the area that is ploughed back in development to that area, was increased to 3% of the total. We felt that this was not fair. After deliberating, we said, the derivation—and this is across the board—whatever is produced from your area, should be set minimally at 13%. We said it should be 13%. I know that some people still think that 13% is too much, because in a situation where, foolishly, the only effort we make economically is selling oil, it seems that giving 13% to an area of derivation would mean in fact that they would be getting

13% of the national product, the nation's product. But that is as a result of bad governance.

What we should do is to diversify so that every other person produces something, so that we export from every other area, so that we have a diversified mode of getting foreign exchange and hard currency. But even if it is a bit too much, even if it were, I say, it is a fee worth paying for peace. I am prepared to go by it.

Then we talk also a lot here about people in detention. Yes, there are people detained. Any country in the world, any government, has every right to maintain peace and order. In politics, like any other job, there are occupational hazards, there are lines drawn, every game has its rules and regulations. If you step over the mark, you get penalized. If you go beyond normal political agitation and go into treason, you have yourself to blame. If you commit arson and murder, you have yourself to blame. At that point it ceases to be political, it becomes criminal. I was watching on the television this afternoon the World Cup rugby. It seemed very orderly. But if somebody suddenly started playing soccer on the rugby field, than there would be chaos.

So I believe that the Ogoni problem—which actually is a painful one, where I personally see people who have suffered greatly—is being addressed. And all we need at the moment is, to give the Constitutional Conference a chance to finish off its job, present its report, and we try and make sure that the government does not interfere with the report. Because as it stands today, the Ogoni people are going to be very rich. We, the others will definitely get jealous of them. That much I know. If they would only use that money for their own development. I warn that if they don't, chaos will continue. But it will not be because of the government; it will be because of their own people's inability to manage what the nation considers rightfully theirs.

**EIR:** You called the Constitutional Conference a peace conference for Nigeria. You think it could be a model for people to learn something for other brutal conflicts in other parts of Africa?

**Ojukwu:** I believe there is no alternative to dialogue. There are too many people who make their money and their wealth as merchants of death. In Africa, we are essentially disadvantaged by nature, sickness, and so on, and we don't have to add conflict to it. We have famine, and when you are fighting, certainly you cannot cultivate. Between you and me, we are sure that we need certainly far more irrigation than machine-guns. I believe anything that can bring about roundtable discussions is infinitely better than the alternative which is strife and bloodshed. When you say “model,” you notice I hesitate. I don't like to think of what I have participated in being the model; no, it is a way forward, and I think the real solution for Africa will be found in that direction rather than the opposite direction.