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THE CONFLICT IN NIGERIA

Statement in the House of Commons, November 26, 1968, by the Secretary of State for External Affairs, the Honourable Mitchell Sharp.

Mr. Speaker, in rising to speak as this debate nears an end I should like to reassure the members of the House that I do not intend to go again in detail over ground that has been covered by other speakers. May I congratulate all of those on all sides of this House who have taken part in this debate upon the very high level of the contributions they have made. If any evidence were needed of the concern of the people of Canada about this tragic war in Nigeria, that evidence is to be found in the speeches made by the representatives of the Canadian people in Parliament. We have no reason to apologize, it seems to me, for spending a day talking about this tragic situation.

The civil war in Nigeria has presented both human and political problems of a high order. The humanitarian problem has been one of amassing vast quantities of food and other assistance for those in need as a result of the hostilities. A great effort, and I think this will be agreed upon on all sides, has been made by the International Red Cross and by other international and national bodies to alleviate the suffering. It is seldom that people of the world have gathered so much in a voluntary way, and amongst governments, for relief of the suffering in a country which has been torn by civil war. But more will be needed as long as the war continues. I can assure the House that Canada will continue to play an important part in this effort.

The political problem is more delicate because, as has been made clear, this is a civil war. There will have to be a readiness by all parties to compromise if a negotiated settlement is to be reached. We in Canada would of course be ready to facilitate the peacekeeping if there were any indication whatever that this would help bring an end to the war. Let us be frank about this. What has been missing so far is not more mediators - there are lots of those - but an indication from both sides that they are willing to participate in meaningful negotiations. The Commonwealth Secretary-General, the Organization for African Unity, both stand ready at a moment's notice to assist in the negotiating process. All they are waiting for is word from both parties that they are prepared to make the concessions necessary to get meaningful negotiations under way. As has been said by many speakers, action by outsiders in a situation such as exists in Nigeria is of no value whatever unless it is effective. As the Prime Minister himself said at the opening of this debate, unless the action is responsive to the wishes of those directly involved it can produce hostile reactions.