

Canadian Action on Nigeria-Biafra

this and in past debates, words which suggest that Canada has been unduly legalistic in its approach to the civil war, that we have failed to act promptly to alleviate suffering, that we have failed to exercise sufficient influence within the Commonwealth to persuade Britain and others to refrain from arms shipments and, above all, that we have failed to play an effective role by refusing to inscribe the subject of Biafra and Nigeria on the agenda of the United Nations.

Some hon. Members: True.

Mr. Perrault: Some hon. members say "True". The great tragedy is that in this entire controversy many people have spoken out very eloquently without having full possession of the facts. That in itself is a tragedy. The same words have been uttered outside the House.

• (10:00 p.m.)

Some profess they cannot comprehend why Canada has not made unilateral efforts to end the civil war and bring aid to starving people. I think it is proper to consider the Canadian position in its true light and determine what Canadians can best do to help. Hon. members are aware that Canadian observers have been on the scene in Nigeria for the past 15 months and we have been assured that other observers may be sent; that Canadian supplies and aircraft are available.

The Canadian effort will continue to be a humanitarian one, as it should be. It is an unspeakable tragedy that the suffering should have endured until this time. This point was touched upon by a member of Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition, the hon. member for Red Deer (Mr. Thompson) who knows considerably more about Africa than do some of his hon. friends. Relief supplies could be in the area now but for the intransigence of Ojukwu who has stubbornly resisted the efforts of the International Red Cross to schedule daylight flights. This is the view which is held almost unanimously by representatives at the United Nations, including those of the socialist countries. Well, he has fled Biafra, reportedly aboard a Fokker Friendship aircraft together with tons of luggage, his family and his Mercedes-Benz. He is no longer a factor in the civil war.

In a debate in this House in late November it was stated that massive daylight relief flights under the IRC formula represented the best hope of relieving starvation in Biafra. Despite Nigerian assent and guarantees from

[Mr. Perrault.]

the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, Ojukwu refused to provide for his people the one kind of relief which would have saved lives.

In early December after the debate in the House I had an opportunity to meet again in New York with the Nigerians and the Biafrans, separately, in the presence of a representative of Canairelief. At the Biafran meeting, objections to the Red Cross daylight lift proposal were again voiced. What were those objections? They were that Nigerian planes might bomb Uli during or immediately following Red Cross flights, despite assurances that this would not happen.

The Biafran representatives in New York and Washington were questioned with respect to other types of aid. These are the questions they were asked, "Would you accept an air drop?" The answer was, "We would not. We are afraid the parcels would damage our huts; we have lost so many huts in this war." The exchange continued, "But, surely, that is a remarkable reply. Would it not be possible to designate a drop area and fly food and medical supplies into that area?" The answer was, "No, we are afraid our people would be killed or injured by the falling food canisters." Only after the incredible nature of these replies had been questioned was it suggested to us that perhaps—just perhaps—aid by helicopter might be accepted.

A few days later, on December 15, in order to meet Biafran objections to daylight aid, the Nigerian government removed all possible doubt about military action interfering with International Red Cross shipments under the ICRC agreement. Nevertheless, there was still no affirmative answer from Ojukwu and no suggestion that the Red Cross plan might proceed on a test basis. Yet Ojukwu is lauded by some as a saviour of his people, a great emancipator.

As the hon. member for Red Deer suggested, perhaps it is time to question some of his motives. Indeed, that time may be more than overdue. Many who are deeply sympathetic to the Ibo people have reached the conclusion that several months ago General Ojukwu and certain of his advisers made a cold-blooded decision to reject daylight flights in favour of the night-time cover provided by the gallant people of Canairelief. He must have known full well, when making this decision, that in order to obtain greater shipments of arms many lives would have to be sacrificed. He, at