

Canadian Action on Nigeria-Biafra

refused to accept daylight flights. But as an institution the International Red Cross had to be supported. It continued to work behind the lines on both sides, and we shall continue to give it our support. I hope the International Red Cross will be the focal point of international efforts, because I think its workers have the greatest experience and can bring about the best co-ordination of international relief.

The government will provide additional funds and supplies as they are required and in co-operation with other interested nations. According to reports from our High Commissioner in Lagos and from our observers on the International Observer Team, these institutions have been operating effectively among refugees in the war area as the Nigerian armies have advanced.

The government is prepared to provide Canadian Armed Forces' aircraft to supplement the work of the organizations presently in Nigeria by way of airdrops to inaccessible areas or by making airlifts when landing facilities are available. We have three Hercules aircraft standing by and are prepared to activate others if they are needed.

In the end, however, the effective distribution of food to the population of eastern Nigeria requires the use of land routes. We today have a report from our High Commissioner in Lagos assuring us that the roads are in better condition than might have been expected in view of the fighting that has taken place in that area. Indeed, I read a report yesterday from our High Commissioner which spoke about a Red Cross team that had run quite freely up and down the roads. Therefore, we are not in the position of not having land routes; some are available and can be put to use immediately.

What is required over the next few weeks and months is a carefully planned, co-operative relief operation. It is our view that this can best be carried out under the aegis of an international organization, preferably the Red Cross, and with the co-operation of the government of Nigeria, which is after all in control of events there. We cannot do anything except in co-operation with them. We in this House should offer our sincere and hearty co-operation to the government of Nigeria, and I am sure we all do so.

Mr. MacDonald (Egmont): Would the minister permit a question on the point about the Hercules aircraft and the necessity of having them in a forward position? I am wondering whether the government has conveyed to the

officials in Lagos the possibility of moving aircraft like the Hercules and other transport equipment into a forward position, in order that we can assist the people in eastern Nigeria as soon as possible?

Mr. Sharp: We have been looking carefully at what we can do in this respect most effectively. One of the things we have already done is to make available to the Nigerian Red Cross and the Rehabilitation Commission money with which to purchase trucks which are as close as possible to the areas affected.

● (9:00 p.m.)

The best place from which to get trucks is neighbouring countries. Taking them across the Atlantic is not the quickest way of getting them there. It may be possible to airlift trucks from some part of Europe down to Lagos, but to transport them across the Atlantic is a very doubtful proposition. Therefore, our judgment of the best way of helping was to make money available so trucks could be purchased there as close as possible to the area. That we did, and we told the Rehabilitation Commission and Nigerian Red Cross what the offer was.

For a year or more Canada has had a senior officer of the Canadian Armed Forces in the area as part of the International Observer team. The senior observers with the team have all had combat experience. They have assured us that they have been given every opportunity to carry out their responsibilities and that they have so far found no evidence of genocide. Some people have said to me, "These observers are not given freedom of action." This is not so. We have had no complaints whatsoever from our observers charging that the Nigerian government has prevented them from going where they wanted to go. Indeed, they have reported that the Nigerian forces have helped the Red Cross and the Nigerian Rehabilitation Commission in caring for refugees and restoring, to the extent possible, normal conditions as they have advanced.

I should like to point out to hon. members that it is both an unusual and a fortunate circumstance that we have in the field, and operating, an observer team, and that the Nigerian government long ago consented to have these observers there. This has certainly helped to remove any fears up until now that genocide is taking place. I agree with hon. members that if possible there should be an increase in the number of observers. This is a

[Mr. Sharp.]