

Government Orders

I want to say to this assembly that the tragedy of life in Bosnia underscores how fortunate we are as Canadians to live in this great country of Canada. Many of us practise different religions. We speak different languages. Close to 400,000 Canadians speak neither French nor English, yet we live in harmony, with tolerance and in understanding of one another.

Previous legislators have taken steps to ensure that all Canadians enjoy the freedoms of conscience, religion, thought, belief, opinion and expression. Our Canadian charter and our Constitution provide a guarantee of freedom and a right to life, liberty and the security of person for all of us in the nation.

People in the former Yugoslavia also have a just claim to these inalienable rights. Because Canadians are a part of a peace loving nation we have an obligation to aid or to ensure those rights may be made possible for those people. From what I have heard in the briefings previous to today and from what I have heard in this assembly I believe we can do this best by keeping our peacekeepers in the Balkans. While we cannot solve the conflict, we can continue to deliver United Nations humanitarian aid which to date has helped, as I have heard, almost three million people.

By remaining in Bosnia we are acting as a conscience to those who are committing the many atrocities. In addition to our 2,000 soldiers, seven Canadian forces members are working as war crimes investigators. According to military officials with whom I have talked on this matter, this unit in some cases has actually prevented some war crimes from taking place and that is certainly a very commendable role. These same officials also tell me that our presence in the former Yugoslavia is preventing the war from spreading into a wider international conflict.

Canada's role in Bosnia is essential. Our troops provide food and medicine to hundreds of thousands of people who would otherwise starve or die of other consequences. Canadian peacekeepers are fulfilling what has become our country's historic international mission for which we are well known. They are promoting peace and security. At the same time they are acting as an international conscience in an area of the world I believe desperately needs that conscience.

[Translation]

Mr. Paul Crête (Kamouraska—Rivière-du-Loup): Mr. Speaker, the hon. member's remarks have made me wonder about the reasons why this question of whether or not to withdraw from Bosnia is creating so much tension in Canada.

• (2130)

I wonder if we should not also reflect on the value of providing the people of Canada with complete and factual information on the situation in Bosnia.

In our day-to-day dealings with people, when they talk about the Bosnian conflict or any other international situation, they often mention the atrocities broadcasted on the news, the casualties, the costs involved, the money spent on that aspect of our international involvement. They are far from having a comprehensive view of the impact of such activities or their importance.

I wonder if the member who spoke before me could tell us how he would feel about asking our soldiers and higher-ranking officers presently serving in Bosnia to take part in some of the public debates in Canada and tell us what they actually saw and experienced, without any partisan bias. They could share their thoughts on the action they saw over there and perhaps even suggest ideas without having their loyalty questioned or risking disciplinary action. I would like the hon. member to tell us what he thinks of that idea.

[English]

Mr. Speaker (Lethbridge): The hon. member has made a very good suggestion in terms of consulting and listening to those people who actually have been there on the scene. I have talked to some volunteers who have been there from a variety of groups providing humanitarian aid outside the military. They have seen atrocities. They have seen starvation. They have seen the difficulties in families and the conflict within families. They feel very sick about it but they do have a story to tell. If they were not there many others would lose their lives because of lack of food and medical care. Their presence even though they are in danger is essential in that sense.

I would think that the government through the senior officers or the leaders should bring forward those people, the common soldiers at the ground level and certainly consult with them and get their opinions. First, from what I have heard to this point that would be substantial information and second, it would encourage us in Canada to continue our presence in Bosnia.

Mr. Julian Reed (Halton—Peel): Mr. Speaker, to rise in a maiden speech on an issue as important as this must be something rather providential, to participate in a debate in which the members have been so constructive. Our colleagues in the Liberal Party, my new friends from the Reform Party, and my new friends from the Bloc have all contributed today not only to a tribute to the expertise, the training of our troops in the very special role we play on the world scene but have also offered a series of constructive suggestions which I hope will be duly noted and dealt with.

I was particularly impressed with my friend from the Reform Party this morning who suggested that because of the expertise we have developed in this country in peacekeeping that we might be in a position to provide that training on an international basis.

We have done that before. In the Second World War we had the Commonwealth air training plan. We provided opportunities for people who were close to the scene in combat to get out of the combat zone and properly train for their role in war. I hear