

Canadian Action on Nigeria-Biafra

were frustrated by the lack of urgency in the speech of the Secretary of State for External Affairs. It was basically a manifesto of formalities, niceties and he gave many excuses for the lack of government action in the past. His speech was filled with procrastination and showed that Canada was refusing to accept the role of a leader in the international community, which would get some relief into the war zone immediately.

• (9:40 p.m.)

On reading the statement the Secretary of State for External Affairs made to the House this afternoon one can see that he has displayed hesitancy and nebulosity. These are attitudes the government has displayed in the Biafran tragedy. He said in his statement that the government hopes that General Gowon will spare no effort in maintaining the discipline of his forces and protecting the lives of all the peoples of Nigeria. He does not demand; he is asking.

He is not saying that we shall send over observers immediately to make sure no atrocities or massacres are committed as Nigerian soldiers overrun the unconquered parts of Biafra. The statement goes on to say that the government considers it of first importance that outside relief activity should be coordinated on an international basis. That point is of first importance to this government. It does not consider that bringing relief supplies immediately to the war zone is of first importance; it considers that precedence must be given to co-ordinating actions with other governments.

If we do all this and waste time, there may not be in the war zone many Biafrans left alive to be helped by our relief and church organizations. The whole statement was ambiguous and hesitant in tone and displayed an attitude that has plagued Parliament and this country too long when the Biafran tragedy has been discussed.

When the minister speaks later in the debate, I hope he will tell us why there was so much delay in giving the money requested for relief purposes. Was the government of Canada aware that Nigerian federal forces planned to mount a full-scale attack on Biafran positions before the announcement respecting financial aid was made? You will recall, Mr. Speaker, that Canairelief had asked for assistance and the Prime Minister (Mr. Trudeau) had promised to reply before Christmas. No reply was given. Then the Prime Minister promised to reply after

Christmas. Once again there was a delay. Then, suddenly, the government announced it would give Canairelief assistance to the tune of \$1 million, and the next day we discovered that Nigeria had mounted an offensive to capture the remaining Biafran-held territory.

I ask the minister to clarify what happened, because many Canadians do not think it a coincidence that Canairelief should be offered money one day before the offensive that was to wipe out Biafra was mounted. I demand an answer to this question, and the people of Canada also demand an answer.

Mr. Pringle: Will the hon. member permit a question?

Mr. Nystrom: If the hon. member does not mind, I should like to finish my remarks, at the end of which I shall try to oblige him. All along the government has been delaying. It was aware that arms were going to Nigeria not only from Russia but from Britain. Yet the Secretary of State for External Affairs has come to us tonight with excuses. He still talks about protocol and technicalities that must be overcome before relief can be flown to the war-torn zone. He may still be worrying about daylight flights. By the time he has made all the appropriate and correct arrangements, many of the people we are concerned about, who are dying of starvation, will not be alive and the relief will do them no good.

The hon. member for Greenwood (Mr. Brewin) told us earlier this evening that a director of a church-operated service in the United States stated today his organization estimates that unless relief is flown to the war zone immediately, within 48 hours as many as 1 million people will die. The relief must be provided immediately; it is crucial. For that reason we should not just sit down and talk about the problems and technicalities involved in giving relief. Canada must take the lead in this matter and must not be reluctant to act.

According to press reports a number of countries appear to be taking hypothetical action in this connection, but other countries are doing something. Although Britain was one of the main culprits in the Nigerian-Biafran tragedy, at least that country is trying to provide assistance. They have sent a cabinet minister to the area and have organized supplies which are ready to be flown in. Canada seems too hesitant and reluctant to act.

There was a time in our history when we led the world as peacemakers. In 1956, when