

External Aid

House of Commons share the deep concern felt by the Canadian people for the suffering and starvation of innocent victims of war. This is particularly true in the case of Nigeria-Biafra where the large number of victims, especially children, has captured the attention of Canadians in all walks of life.

This interest of the Canadian people to some extent has been brought about by the emphasis given to the unfortunate situation in that part of the world by the news media, combined with the basic instinct of Canadians to give help and assistance to those in need. The purpose of this debate, as I see it, is to consider the facts that were brought before the standing committee on external affairs and national defence in order to arrive at a decision as to what Canada can do and should have done to bring assistance to the people of that area.

In all issues where emotions are running high it is important that we in the House of Commons, as legislators, remain cool and assess things in a reasonable manner so that we have all the relevant facts to determine a reasonable course of action which will afford us an opportunity to give the Canadian people the chance to properly and effectively help people through our humanitarian aid. It was for this reason that on Monday, October 7, the standing committee on external affairs and national defence was set up and given a special reference, first, to consider the conduct of the federal troops in that war and, second, to consider the famine conditions in Nigeria.

I am privileged to be a member of that standing committee which held 24 hearings between October 8 and October 23. Some 16 witnesses appeared before the committee, three from the Department of External Affairs and three from political parties, two of these being members of the House of Commons, one a Conservative and one a member of the New Democratic party, and the third a member of a provincial legislature who is also a member of the New Democratic party. In addition we received evidence from six persons representing religious and service organizations including the Red Cross, CUSO, and Presbyterian and Catholic agencies. A further two witnesses from the news media were heard, and in addition the secretary-general of the Commonwealth and Canada's representative on the international observer team, General Milroy.

During this debate I do not intend to go over the mass of evidence that was received

in that committee. I, for one, was disappointed when witnesses were not heard from the Organization of African Unity or from Nigeria or Biafra. I think that those who are deeply concerned and obviously directly involved with the matter should have been given the opportunity to present their case before the standing committee. Unfortunately we heard no such evidence.

The contrast in the evidence presented to the committee and the information received by the public, from the press was astounding, to say the least. In the early days of October when the committee first met it was not uncommon for the public and even for members of the committee to throw about charges of genocide, as if it were a proven fact. Yet when one looks at the evidence presented to our committee there appears to be no justification whatever for that serious charge.

Certain members of the committee were so convinced of this charge at that time that they wanted us to use the charge as a basis to bringing the matter before the United Nations. Subsequently that argument was dropped and another put in its place, that we should go before the third committee on human rights. I have not yet heard the justification for that position.

Mr. Thompson (Red Deer): Haven't you?

Mr. Cafik: There have been many changes in attitude. In the first instance hon. members concentrated on the need for humanitarian aid. I recall that before the committee was established questions in this house were directed to the matter of humanitarian aid that Canada ought to be supplying to this area. We agree that there is a need for aid and that Canada has done a great deal. As soon as the committee hearings began and we sat down to listen to evidence, particularly to evidence from two people who are members of this house, we found, and this was a surprise to me, that the general attitude had changed. We rapidly discovered that certain hon. members were hoping for some kind of political intervention. In the beginning humanitarian aid was all that was discussed. Later, humanitarian aid was almost irrelevant. It was said that the government must become politically involved. That was quite a significant change.

The new attitudes now take the following form: First, that we should take the matter to the United Nations, an argument that many hon. members feel is the correct one. I, for one, do not think it is a good idea and I will