

Alleged Failure to Aid Biafrans

• (4:40 p.m.)

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Trudeau: I think that what the government, as a government, cannot do, private citizens can do and have done. For the government's part, while assisting the Red Cross we were at the same time pressing for daylight flights. Now that the Red Cross is no longer flying, it is all the more imperative that some massive relief operation get under way.

The government readily admits, and has said so before, that it faces a question which demands continual and urgent examination—whether to take steps such as assisting Canairelief, which are likely to be objected to by the Nigerian government, or to take steps such as dropping food by air in daylight which are again likely to be objected to by the Biafrans. I recognize that this could be interpreted as a decision involving a value judgment about which side in the war is at fault. I hope we shall not be forced into such a judgment but, instead, reach only a decision as to which is the most effective way of alleviating the suffering.

I suggest that this attitude on the part of the government and these persistent endeavours cannot in any circumstances be described as indifference, as partisanship or as stubbornness. We are doing what we think is right and what the overwhelming majority of African leaders tell us is right. Hon. members opposite would not suggest, I am sure, that compassion is to be found only on their side of the House.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. MacDonald (Egmont): Could I put a question to the Prime Minister? He has indicated that the Biafran authorities now expect political guarantees, though he has been reluctant to mention the nature of those guarantees. Are we to understand that they relate to some kind of diplomatic recognition? Is he not being somewhat unfair to the Biafran authorities by not clearing the air on this issue, by not indicating why he is taking his present position? Some of the things the Biafrans have said relate to certain kinds of sanction, which could amount to a kind of political recognition. Or was it more specifically stated than that?

Mr. Trudeau: I am referring to matters of this precise nature. From the question, I [Mr. Trudeau.]

assume the hon. member has some very precise information about the type of conditions which have been made by the Biafran representatives. I can only repeat that the hon. member seems to know much about this. I have said publicly that if the Biafran authorities want to state publicly what these conditions are, I do not mind; it will be up to the House and to the country to judge whether or not they are tantamount to political conditions. It is our opinion that they are. I am not anxious to make public the details of discussions which took place between the two parties. I am sure that if I were to do so I should be blamed, just as the United States was blamed when it made public some discussions which had taken place in confidence between it and the North Vietnamese. Once again, if this were to be denied by the Biafrans and if they say there are no political conditions, we shall be delighted; I shall have been proved wrong in my information but we shall be able to begin the daylight flights. I repeat: the military guarantees which had been asked for by the Biafrans were all met as far as we can see. The Red Cross obtained consent from the Lagos government to meet all that was required by way of military guarantees. The Biafrans wanted more than military guarantees; they wanted political guarantees. These, we were unable to give for the reasons I have stated.

Mr. MacDonald (Egmont): May I ask a further question?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order, please. I wonder whether we should pursue the debate in this way. I see that the hon. member for York South (Mr. Lewis), the hon. member for Greenwood (Mr. Brewin) and the hon. member for Oshawa-Whitby (Mr. Broadbent) all want to ask questions. I am sure the hon. member for Greenwood wants to ask a question. I am prepared for the House to proceed in this way, but it is not a practice I wish to encourage. Having said this, I shall call the hon. member for Greenwood and perhaps end the exchanges at that point.

Mr. MacDonald (Egmont): On a point of order, Mr. Speaker. This is a major question which has troubled parliament and the country for well over a year. We have had a number of special debates on it. I think the value of a debate lies in a real dialogue taking place, not in the expression of fixed positions from one side of the House or from the other. I think this is what the Prime Minister himself would wish. During these