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THE PROBLEM OF RELIEF FOR SECESSIONIST NIGERIA - I

Statement by Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau in
the House of Commons, November 25, 1969.

In the past few days several questions have been asked of me in the House of Commons with respect to steps taken by the Government of Canada to assist in the shipment of relief supplies to the civilian populations of the secessionist areas of Nigeria. Because it is desirable to set forth in a single statement the several aspects of Canadian efforts in this regard, the following brief chronological record has been prepared:

In October 1968, Canadian Forces Hercules aircraft were despatched to the Nigerian area for use in carrying relief cargoes to Biafra. One of those aircraft joined the night airlift, the hazards and inefficiencies of which were then and have always been recognized.

In late October 1968, my personal representative, Professor Ivan Head, journeyed to Lagos for discussions with the Nigerian head of state, General Gowon, about the possibilities of additional relief shipments. It was as a result of that Canadian initiative that the Nigerians agreed to permit daylight relief flights subject to only a single condition, an undertaking by Colonel Ojukwu that he would not take advantage of the situation and fly in arms during daylight hours.

The proposal for daylight flights on these terms was transmitted through the International Committee of the Red Cross and other channels to Colonel Ojukwu. When in November no reply had been received from Colonel Ojukwu, and the Nigerian Government announced that it could no longer guarantee the safety of aircraft flying into Biafra at night, the Canadian Government withdrew its aircraft. Canada stated at that time that it would consider replacing the aircraft once appropriate daylight delivery arrangements were concluded.

Not until June 1969, some eight months following the announcement of the daylight relief flight proposal, did the Biafran authorities comment officially upon it. Not even then did Biafra accept the idea of daylight relief. It only said that, subject to five conditions, it would be "willing to consider" daylight flights.