

Inquiries of the Ministry

Hon. Mitchell Sharp (Secretary of State for External Affairs): Mr. Speaker, we hope the Canadian Hercules aircraft will be on the way to Nigeria within 48 hours with a reconnaissance party to survey the conditions of air strips in federal and rebel held areas in Nigeria as well as Fernando Po. A second aircraft is to be placed on standby for possible early departure.

Mr. David Lewis (York South): Mr. Speaker, will the Secretary of State for External Affairs tell the house the reasons for the delay in dispatching aircraft with supplies, and tell us what the need is for reconnaissance which he suggested would be the first job done by the Hercules?

Mr. Sharp: Mr. Speaker, I have no doubt that the Hercules will be very valuable in the movement of supplies. It is not the lack of food in the area that is important at this time, it is the lack of transportation. The aircraft is going to be there for service, and it will be understood by hon. members that this type of aircraft is of a special kind. It is most important, if we are to make the best use of it, to know the exact conditions under which it will be operating. There is no question, however, about its operation as such.

Mr. Lewis: I should like to ask the minister whether any conditions were imposed by the Nigerian authorities as to where the planes are to fly from and where they are to land. Are they to be flown by day or by night or both?

Mr. Sharp: Mr. Speaker, there is only one general condition, and that is that an arrangement must be made between the international committee of the Red Cross and the government of Nigeria.

Mr. J. M. Forrestall (Dartmouth-Halifax): Will the minister indicate whether the Hercules or other types of aircraft will be offered to relief groups other than the International Red Cross?

Mr. Sharp: Mr. Speaker, the general understanding with most governments is that it is preferable to channel all our relief through the International Red Cross. That is the accepted international practice.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Gérard Laprise (Abitibi): Mr. Speaker, I should like to direct a question to the honourable Secretary of State for External Affairs.

[Mr. Baldwin.]

While the honourable minister was at the United Nations in New York, did he get in touch with representatives of the United Nations or certain African countries, in order to obtain, through pressure or otherwise, a cease-fire between Nigeria and Biafra?

[*English*]

Mr. Sharp: Mr. Speaker, this is the kind of question which I think would be better answered before the committee. I am sure it will be asked there, and I think it deserves a longer answer than Your Honour would permit at this time.

Mr. Lincoln M. Alexander (Hamilton West): Mr. Speaker, will the minister advise this house as to the number of aircraft that will be placed at the disposal of the International Red Cross and/or other relief agencies?

Mr. Sharp: Mr. Speaker, the government has not yet made a decision, but there will be at least two.

[*Translation*]

Mr. Bernard Dumont (Frontenac): Mr. Speaker, I should like to ask a supplementary question.

In a statement on the troubles in Biafra, the Secretary of State for External Affairs reaffirmed that Canada would support Nigeria against the secessionist rebels. Could the Prime Minister tell us if the policy of his government is the same as that of his minister, namely to keep on murdering Biafrans, or if it consists in helping Biafrans to free themselves from federal Nigerian troops.

[*English*]

Mr. Sharp: Mr. Speaker, I think that question illustrates one of the most important reasons why we do not want to get mixed up in the politics of Nigeria.

Mr. S. J. Korchinski (Mackenzie): Mr. Speaker, in view of the fact that the former prime minister indicated that the relief to be provided by Canada will be of limited assistance, will the minister seriously consider the provision of more aircraft for relief purposes?

Mr. Sharp: Mr. Speaker, as will appear, I hope, in the committee, the greatest problem of relief remains; because the most serious conditions are going to arise in the future rather than now, and I believe this country and the international community as a whole are going to be engaged in one of the most important relief operations the world has ever seen.