

External Aid

relief planes to land by day in their territory. Shortly thereafter we learned that the Nigerians would no longer agree to the continuation of night flights into the rebel area. It was evident that the federal government intended to step up military action against the shipments of arms which were going in at night, evidently in increasing quantities.

As I have reported to the house, my appeal was conveyed to the rebel authorities by the International Committee of the Red Cross, and although many days have passed we have received no clearcut reply. We are seeking every means possible to commence the daylight operation. Hon. members will understand the reason why we cannot accept at face value every statement attributed to some self-claimed rebel spokesmen. These statements have proved again and again to be contradictory. At the same time I stress that we do not reject these statements out of hand. In each case, as with the message conveyed to me yesterday by the hon. member for Greenwood (Mr. Brewin), we attempt through the Red Cross channel to determine the authenticity of the communication. The Red Cross has served in this fashion as a channel of communication for decades, and with great honour. We see no reason to doubt either the integrity or the effectiveness of the Red Cross in these respects.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Trudeau: Our aircraft stationed on Fernando Po has not been without work. It has been able to perform several useful assignments for the Red Cross related to their work in the Nigerian area, but if it remains unable to participate in the airlift into the rebel area the responsibility rests squarely with the Ojukwu régime.

We have of course also offered aircraft to fly relief supplies into the federal-held regions of eastern Nigeria. A Hercules flew to Lagos for this purpose in October. Accompanying that aircraft were reconnaissance officers whose task it was to ascertain landing sites. To the distress of all concerned it was learned that the forward airports were incapable of utilization for relief flights by this size of aircraft for prolonged periods without permanent runway damage. The foundation of the runway at Enugu had been weakened by severe and prolonged rains, the heaviest in the history of Nigeria; the runway at Calabar was not well constructed and was in addition damaged as a result of the fighting in that area.

While Mr. Head was in Lagos he therefore discussed with General Gowon and his officials the provision of other, lighter aircraft which could replace the Hercules. The Nigerian government expressed a desire to receive Canadian Caribou aircraft and my government stated it was willing to supply them. However, as I repeated in the house yesterday, the policy of the Canadian government throughout has been to make our relief assistance available, not to the Nigerian government nor to the rebel authorities but to the Red Cross for impartial administration and distribution according to civilian need. We have been informed by the Nigerian Red Cross that that body is not now able to utilize efficiently the Caribou. We have been asked to delay the dispatch of these airplanes, and we have done so.

Before concluding, Mr. Speaker, I should touch on another important aspect of the Nigerian problem. Canadian participation in the international team of observers has been studied at length by the committee and I need not comment in detail. I would like to say, however, that it has seemed most worth while for Canada to participate. We are pleased to continue to participate in the extended work of the team. There was much loose talk at an earlier stage accusing the federal Nigerian government of genocide, and I think that that government acted wisely in inviting observers from a number of countries and organizations to assess the situation independently. The reports of the observer team have refuted these glib charges. For our part, we take this operation very seriously and expect our observers to move about freely, observe and report fully and frankly. They have done so. So has the United Nations observer.

May I pay a personal tribute to the Canadian officers involved, as well as to the officers and crews of the Canadian aircraft involved in our relief contribution, for the spirit and competence with which they have been performing duties which are somewhat out of their regular line. We are proud of them all.

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

● (3:50 p.m.)

Mr. Trudeau: With respect to our aircrew, Mr. Speaker, I have great pleasure in informing the house that the I.C.R.C. has communicated to the Canadian Red Cross its praise for the efficiency and conduct of the Canadian Hercules crew presently stationed in Fernando Po. The national commissioner