

Canadian Action on Nigeria-Biafra

gave governmental leadership to General Ironsi. Then there was the second coup, reportedly led by General Gowon which eliminated General Ironsi and the subsequent establishment of Lt. Colonel Ojukwu as governor of the eastern area where the Ibo people have their traditional home and where several hundred thousand fled following the massacres of a year or two earlier.

• (9:20 p.m.)

One would also have to recapitulate the trek home of the Ibo people. Certainly this is one of the tragic chapters in the history of independent Africa. However, I think we must at this time be pragmatic. It is not good enough now to try and lay the blame at the doorstep of this one or that. The people of Canada and the government of Canada have a tremendous responsibility to pick up the pieces wherever we are able, to attempt to prevent the deaths of tens of thousands of people, deaths that will take place in the next week or two unless efficient and prompt action is taken. The situation is far more tragic there today than we here can understand.

I wish to make a few observations as a result of my discussions with representatives of member countries of the OAU committee which was set up to deal with the Biafran situation. I was told there was no doubt that more than 2 million civilians had lost their lives during the course of this conflict over the last two years. I was also told that unless the war stopped within three months, it was conservatively estimated that there would be another 3 million deaths because the masses of people in the little enclave which was Biafran territory at that time were living on the threshold of death by starvation, malnutrition or disease.

One thing which was made very clear to me was that the political differences between Nigeria and secessionist Biafra would have to be settled by Nigerians with the aid of Africans who were members of the Organization of African Unity, and that there had already been far too much interference by European nations. Much has been said about the actions of the United Kingdom, Russia and France in this war. The inference was that their actions were not only concerned with the supplying of arms but were also political in nature.

I am convinced that those who criticized the Canadian government and said it should have gone in and stopped the war did not know what they were talking about. The

[Mr. Thompson.]

question which immediately posed itself to me was: How could this have been done?

Some hon. Members: Hear, hear.

Mr. Thompson: It was legitimate to try to convince Great Britain that her policies were wrong and to make appeals to Russia, France and the United Nations, but how could Canada have involved itself in the internal affairs of Nigeria? Could it have been done by moving in an army? Of course, this could not have been done. Could we have tried to club Great Britain over the head until she saw some reason in the situation? This we could not do, either. We had a responsibility to use our influence, and I hope this has been done in the most effective way possible. If it has not been done, Mr. Speaker, then part of the responsibility for what has happened in Biafra will also be ours.

Again I say that the point of my remarks is not to try to accuse somebody but to try and outline the facts as they were explained to me by Africans. I discussed the matter of genocide with African leaders and expressed to them our concern. I explained to them how the emotions of the Canadian people had been roused in a very unique and commendable way through fear of what was happening in Nigeria.

I was reminded by these Africans, who wanted a settlement just as much as we did, and even more, that the International Observer Team which had gone to Nigeria could not substantiate with evidence the charge that there had been an intentional attempt by the government of Nigeria to eliminate or destroy the Ibo people. In fact General Gowon is not a Hausa, or even a Mohammedan; he is a Christian and belongs to one of the small tribes of central Nigeria. This is also the case with many of his leaders. Many Ibo people retained senior positions in the Nigerian government throughout the war years. In fact, General Gowon's own wife is an Ibo girl.

One of the things General Gowon has said to people who know him personally is that he did not want to have to accept the blame for military action killing millions of people, or at least tens of thousands of people more than had already been killed by direct military action and thus held back indirect military action. So, Mr. Speaker, there is another side to the story.

Without trying to minimize the situation in Nigeria that led to the secessionist action of General Ojukwu, it is important that we evaluate the situation from the standpoint that