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## THE PROBLEM OF RELIEF FOR SECESSIONIST NIGERIA - II

Statement by Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau  
in the House of Commons, November 27, 1969.

...Any armed conflict is terrible. But when events conspire to make children the principal victims, then the horror of all persons turns to revulsion. We should be less than human if we did not attempt to alleviate that suffering. The debate today asks if Government attempts in that respect have been correct, if Canadian policy should be measured by one criterion — contributing or not contributing to a single charitable operation.

Canadians possess no secret formula for concluding wars; they are not gifted with any divine guidance into the rights and wrongs of the arguments of strangers. Canadians do believe, however, that political quarrels cannot be successfully concluded on a battlefield. The complex human relations which must somehow be repaired and restored, the confidence which must be created in the place of fear — these difficult and sensitive tasks cannot be performed in an atmosphere of war. They can only be the product of consultation and negotiation.

Canada has repeated these views again and again to the combatants in this war and it has expressed publicly its attitude with respect to the supply of arms from outside. We have stated, as well, that we are anxious to do whatever we can to assist in such consultations or negotiations. Just as we made available senior and experienced Canadian military personnel to serve on the international observer team in Nigeria, we are ready to make available talented Canadian diplomats to contribute to the process of peaceful settlement.

To intervene when not asked, however, would not be an act of courage; it would be an act of stupidity. There are some 30 countries in Africa south of the Sahara that have achieved independence since 1957. Every one of these emerged into nationhood following a lengthy and anguished colonial history. No single act would be regarded with more hostility by any of them than the unilateral intervention of a non-African state into their affairs.

I say this not from surmise but because it was made very clear on at least two occasions by the Organization of African Unity. They have said that this is an African problem, and that outside interference in this conflict would not be welcome. Certainly, it is presumptuous on our part to think that we, white

people who are far away in North America, know more about Africa than the 30-odd countries, the members of the Organization of African Unity, which made the statement.

Because of that, it would be wrong for the Canadian Government to assist the Nigerian Government militarily, but it would be equally wrong for the Canadian Government to assist the rebel régime politically. Each is an act of intervention. Each would be a presumptuous step, an arrogant step, I would say, for a country so distant as Canada.

What Canada can do, and what it must do, however, is to attempt to feed the children who will starve to death without help. A starving child prompts an emotional response, and properly so. But that emotion must serve to assist the children, and not the reverse. It has been said by some...that this is the greatest human tragedy of our time. It may be, but I doubt it. The nature of man is so perverse that in the past few years there have taken place tragedies of indescribable proportions in several developing countries — the mass slaughters during the partition of India, the atrocities in Algeria, the massacres in Indonesia. Even while the Nigerian war continues, there have been bloody conflicts in the southern Sudan and in Chad. The Canadian Government did not intervene, and is not intervening in these sad situations. No Canadian Government did so, and no Canadian opposition party criticized those decisions, because of the inescapable limitations upon the effective actions which Canada can take.

The Nigerian tragedy does not become different from these others simply because some persons employ superlatives, or repeat accusations of genocide when these allegations have been proved demonstrably incorrect, or relate highly-inflated death-rate figures. Nigeria is only different because we know more about it and because it is children who are the principal sufferers.

I suggest that there are several points on which there is no dispute among Hon. Members. We share a common revulsion to the suffering which has been brought about by this war. We share a common desire to aid the victims. We all recognize the fragile and inadequate nature of a night relief airlift which must share a single runway and surrounding air-space with competitive arms flights.

Where we differ is in our judgment of the best means to increase the flow of relief. On the basis of careful evaluations of reports received from qualified observers from many sources, the Government has concluded that the only truly effective way of delivering adequate supplies of relief to Biafra is by way of daylight flights. Not only is a daylight airlift safer but, because of the different flying conditions, many more airplanes could be accommodated in any one day than in any one night. When one adds to these facts the additional fact that the airport would not be used for arms deliveries in the daytime, then the flow of relief would increase severalfold.

These facts, which are indisputable, prompted the Canadian Government to do whatever it could to persuade the parties to permit daylight relief flights to occur. In making these efforts, we attempted to understand and to meet the objections which were raised by one side or the other to the principle of daylight relief flights.

I related to this House on November 4, 1968, and again two days ago, the Canadian initiative which exacted from the Lagos authorities a guarantee

of safety for daylight flights. I am able to reveal as well that it was as a result of the visit of my representative to Nigeria in June of this year that the two essential elements of any daylight arrangement were identified and agreed to. These are the identification of the aircraft involved and the inspection of the cargo.

Canadian efforts since that time have been directed to a means of assisting in this identification and this inspection. We have taken the position that it is not for us to assess whether the military fears of one side or the other are reasonable or responsible. Rather, we have sought to produce a formula that would meet those fears, a formula which would assure the Nigerians that relief aircraft were in fact relief aircraft, that relief cargos were in fact relief cargos — in short, a formula that would assure to the Biafrans that the aircraft were not disguised bombers or troop-carriers, that food parcels were not tampered with, that daylight flights could not be used as a cover for a hostile military operation.

The negotiations conducted this summer by the International Committee of the Red Cross were based upon these principles.

That is why I think it is slightly unfair to suggest that the Red Cross has been bogged down and caught up in outmoded concepts. This is not the aspect which has deterred the Red Cross from attempting to bring its mercy flights to the Biafrans. That operation stopped...after a Red Cross aircraft was shot down in the middle of the night.

Even though it may have been clearly marked, it was shot down in conditions of poor visibility — entre chien et loup. It was following that that the Red Cross stopped flying. It did so not because problems of sovereignty were raised but because it realized, as I think we realized prior to that, that it would be infinitely better to reach agreement to fly by day. The reasons that agreement has not been reached, as I shall show in a moment, are not because of outmoded concepts of sovereignty but because both parties have been unable to come to an agreement as to the conditions under which the Red Cross could pursue its mercy flights during the daytime. Therefore it is not a legal technicality -- it is a question of whether the Red Cross is permitted to make its mercy flights during the daytime.

When the Ojukwu regime balked at the implementation of the proposed agreement because of fear of military disadvantage, Canada was disappointed but it made no public entreaties or complaints. We thought that the Biafran fears were unfortunate and, indeed, that they were unjustified, but we nevertheless attempted to meet them. We consulted with United States officials, and in particular with Ambassador Clyde Ferguson, who is President Nixon's relief co-ordinator and whose exhaustive trips into the area and discussions abroad have made him probably the most knowledgeable and qualified person in the world on this question. A formula of assurances was devised which we sincerely thought met every one of the Biafran military objections.

The Government was shocked when that offer of assurances was turned down out of hand by Colonel Ojukwu. It was even more shocked when Canadian officials were informed by Biafran representatives that military assurances were not enough, that fear of military disadvantage was not the main reason for Biafran rejection of daylight flights, that desire for political advantage was the reason.

I have been asked to spell out the Biafran demands in these respects. I have been reluctant to do so because this would be a breach of the normal rules which regulate discussions of that sort. I will only add that Canada was asked for an assurance of a political character, and of a nature so extreme that no government could accede to it and still make any claim to non-intervention and non-support of the political aims of one side or the other. Those persons who have repeated so often their contention that Canada, as an impartial country, could play a mediator role would, I am sure, be the first to object to Canada placing itself in such a position.

The resolution before the House urges the Government to support Canairelief. The Government recognizes the courage of the pilots and crews of the Joint Church Aid aircraft, and regrets that they are forced to risk their lives every night in order to carry out the task they have assumed. From my place in this House I have urged Canadians to support the efforts of Canairelief through generous financial contributions. I applaud the one which was mentioned this afternoon... but it is, unfortunately, a matter of record that those contributions have been far short of the amount needed.

It is also a matter of record that Canairelief qualifies under United States laws, as a carrier of United States foreign aid, for freight payments.... Those freight payments will continue so long as Canairelief carries cargoes of preponderantly U.S. origin. In the result, Canairelief, a private Canadian charitable organization, is employed as a cargo airline, engaged in the carriage of U.S. goods to Biafra, and is receiving payment for that task. I say this not critically but as an explanation of the position in which Canairelief finds itself. I say it also as a refutation of the totally baseless charge that..."the United States is likely to withdraw its support of Canairelief because the Canadian Government will not support its own citizens". There is absolutely no foundation in fact for that allegation, because the support of the United States Government stems from the situation as I have described it....

The Canadian Government has not granted any support hitherto to Canairelief for two reasons. The first is that our contributions were made to the International Red Cross, which at that time was the only agency flying relief to both sides in the conflict. Supporting the Red Cross was consistent with our aim of impartiality in the war. The Red Cross amassed a proud record: 2,030 flights, carrying over 23,000 tons of relief supplies.

Our second reason stems from the argument I made a few moments ago: that in our view all Government efforts should now be focused on daylight flights.

It will be remembered that Canairelief commenced its operations as complementary to the Government-assisted Red Cross flights. It was correctly recognized that there were limits to the Government's freedom of action, limits expressed not just by the Nigerian Government but by more than 30 African governments in the OAU, and that there was a role to be played by a private Canadian organization. The Canadian Government welcomed that initiative.

I have said many times that, if Canadians, private organizations, and, I hope, members of the Opposition and on this side of the House, want to help Canairelief, it is an act of which we will certainly approve. I have said that many times.

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 endeavors 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....

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