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THE CONFLICT IN NIGERIA

Statement in the House of Commons, November 26, 1968, by the Secretary of State for External Affairs, the Honourable Mitchell Sharp.

Mr. Speaker, in rising to speak as this debate nears an end I should like to reassure the members of the House that I do not intend to go again in detail over ground that has been covered by other speakers. May I congratulate all of those on all sides of this House who have taken part in this debate upon the very high level of the contributions they have made. If any evidence were needed of the concern of the people of Canada about this tragic war in Nigeria, that evidence is to be found in the speeches made by the representatives of the Canadian people in Parliament. We have no reason to apologize, it seems to me, for spending a day talking about this tragic situation.

The civil war in Nigeria has presented both human and political problems of a high order. The humanitarian problem has been one of amassing vast quantities of food and other assistance for those in need as a result of the hostilities. A great effort, and I think this will be agreed upon on all sides, has been made by the International Red Cross and by other international and national bodies to alleviate the suffering. It is seldom that people of the world have gathered so much in a voluntary way, and amongst governments, for relief of the suffering in a country which has been torn by civil war. But more will be needed as long as the war continues. I can assure the House that Canada will continue to play an important part in this effort.

The political problem is more delicate because, as has been made clear, this is a civil war. There will have to be a readiness by all parties to compromise if a negotiated settlement is to be reached. We in Canada would of course be ready to facilitate the peacekeeping if there were any indication whatever that this would help bring an end to the war. Let us be frank about this. What has been missing so far is not more mediators - there are lots of those - but an indication from both sides that they are willing to participate in meaningful negotiations. The Commonwealth Secretary-General, the Organization for African Unity, both stand ready at a moment's notice to assist in the negotiating process. All they are waiting for is word from both parties that they are prepared to make the concessions necessary to get meaningful negotiations under way. As has been said by many speakers, action by outsiders in a situation such as exists in Nigeria is of no value whatever unless it is effective. As the Prime Minister himself said at the opening of this debate, unless the action is responsive to the wishes of those directly involved it can produce hostile reactions.

Canada's whole policy towards African and other newly emerging countries in recent years has been built on a spirit of co-operation rather than intervention. African history is ripe with examples of domination and intervention by peoples from other continents, and Africans are rightly sensitive about their hard-won sovereignty and their right to manage their own affairs.

Canada has earned a good name in Africa. Many speakers have mentioned this. They have said that Canada has a good reputation. Why do we have a good reputation? - Because we observe these principles of co-operation and non-intervention. We have been able to make a positive contribution to developments on that continent. We have been welcome in the Commonwealth countries of Africa, and we have been welcome in the *francophone* countries of Africa. We have been welcome because our policy has been to assist Africans and not to tell them how to run their affairs.

Canada's policy has therefore been recognized as sympathetic and disinterested. This Government does not intend to change that policy regardless of emotional appeals, however well-intentioned they may be, because I believe, and so I believe do all Hon. Members of this House, that if we were to abandon that policy we would become unacceptable and ineffective in the vast task that remains on that continent to overcome the problems of underdevelopment and to create viable political societies on that continent.

I am confident, Mr. Speaker, that the Government will have the support not only of a majority of the Members of this House - I hope of all Hon. Members - but of the overwhelming majority of the people of Canada in pursuing this course.

The Government's responsibilities on the international scene are different from those of private organizations. In saying this I am not criticizing non-governmental groups operating in Nigeria or in other areas. The churches and other groups have done commendable work in bringing aid to the needy, and I join with many of the Members who have spoken in praising their work. I support it. I hope that everybody in this House and that all Canadians will support the work of the churches. What I am saying is that governments must act as governments. For example, the Canadian Government has chosen to funnel its food and transport aid in the Nigerian situation through the International Committee of the Red Cross, the traditional organization for the assembly and distribution of assistance in difficult situations of this sort.

The International Committee of the Red Cross has maintained working relations with the federal Nigerian authorities and with those in charge on the rebel side. It has the necessary support staff and organization on both sides. It has proven worthy of our support and continued co-operation, and I am quite sure that Hon. Members who spoke would not wish to reflect in any way on the excellent work done over years and years by the International Red Cross, and which is working so effectively in Nigeria.

The Standing Committee on External Affairs and National Defence has made a most commendable examination of the many complex factors involved in this difficult situation. Its report contains recommendations in nine areas, and it might be useful if I commented briefly on those recommendations. We shall, of course, be giving further study to the points made, and shall be pursuing them if this is feasible or desirable as the situation develops further. An indication of our views on them however may be helpful at this stage.

On the observer team the Committee noted that the initial invitation for the observers was for two months, and suggested the Government request the Nigerians to extend the duration of this invitation. In the interval since the Committee's report was presented the Nigerians have in fact extended the operation of the team for a further month. We have been able to extend our participation accordingly and would expect further discussion of this and related questions at an appropriate time with the Federal Military Government, and with those other countries and bodies participating in the observer team.

The question of whether the observers or a similar team should make observations on the rebel side is complicated by conflicting reports from the rebel authorities. I do not know whether the House is aware of some of the criticisms that have been made by the Biafran authorities, but let me read how the Biafran Commissioner of Information described the observer team. He said: "We don't recognize the observer team. They are a bunch of crooks." It is difficult, under these circumstances, for there to be any particular welcome for that group of observers in Africa. We shall however continue to study the feasibility of this proposal.

To the extent that the Committee's second recommendation deals with continuing and future Canadian assistance to Nigeria, I can report that we are in regular contact with the World Bank and with interested governments. The World Bank currently has a team of experts in Nigeria studying economic projects and priorities, and we expect to have the benefit of the conclusions of this team when it returns. It is important to note that assessments of this kind in any country must be carried out with the concurrence of the government concerned, and I may add, Mr. Speaker, that in this respect the co-operation between Nigeria and the World Bank is proving to be very useful at this critical juncture.

In so far as the Committee was referring to emergency food aid, the Government has had constant advice from the International Committee of the Red Cross both on the amounts needed and on the particular categories of food to be emphasized.

The question of land and sea corridors has been discussed in the Committee and in this House. It is one of those items on which it has not been possible for the two sides to agree, despite the best efforts of the relief agencies. I am sure we all regret this because it is quite clear, as was pointed out by one of the speakers in the far corner, who said, "It would take planes moving in at about one a minute to supply the food that will probably be needed", and what we need will probably be land corridors.

I regret, as I am sure do all Hon. Members, the fact that it has not been possible to work this out. I hope it still will be possible. Most of all I hope that the war will be over.

The Committee's proposal for international machinery to aid innocent civilian victims of hostilities is one I supported at the United Nations. The House may recall, and the Members who were observers at the United Nations General Assembly will remember, that I made specific recommendations along these lines. These are now being discussed with other governments, and I hope will result in some positive action.

The Committee's third recommendation relates to the continuation of our emergency aid to the victims of the hostilities. The Government has intensified its efforts to be of assistance in the humanitarian sphere. I wish to announce, Mr. Speaker, that we have made a further allocation of food aid to Nigerian-Biafra in the amount of \$1,600,000. A shipment will be made early in the new year.

This aid will be distributed, as the other food aid was, to both sides. When we made our shipment on the vessel that left some time ago - and the vessel arrived recently - it was decided that the food was to go to various bases so that it could be moved either into the rebel areas or into the areas controlled by the Nigerian Government. The planning we have undertaken has followed consultations with the Red Cross and other contributors in order that the delivery of our supplies could fit in with their plans.

As to the airlift into rebel territories, it is obvious that daylight operations would permit the delivery of much larger quantities of relief. The Prime Minister therefore appealed to the rebel authorities to agree to daylight flights. I earnestly hope that Colonel Ojukwu will give his consent without further delay. It is tragic that food should be waiting to be moved in to feed hungry children, and is being held up because the necessary authority has not been granted for the movement. As to relief operations on the Federal side, Canadian Caribou aircraft have been offered through the Canadian Red Cross Society, and we await confirmation from the Nigerian Red Cross that they can be put to effective use.

In all these efforts we have worked closely with and relied heavily on the International Red Cross and the Canadian Red Cross Society. We are grateful for their help and advice.

The Committee proposed that we should offer, in concert with other interested governments, to provide non-military assistance in building a civil airstrip for the exclusive use of relief flights. This is a useful proposal, which will be explored, along with others, in preparing further development of our aid programme to Nigeria. For the immediate future we have considered it better to use the facilities already existing and, for example, just recently we offered the lighter Caribou aircraft for use in federal-held territory, since the Hercules is too heavy for the forward airfields. It has been said on a number of occasions that the Canadian Government would like to have the Hercules aircraft fly into Nigerian territory and into Biafran territory. They are not flying to Biafran territory because we cannot obtain agreement from the rebels, and they are not flying into Nigeria because there are no airstrips suitable for that size of aircraft.

I hope Colonel Ojukwu is listening when the Prime Minister of the country makes an appeal. I hope he responds quickly so that we may help to feed these people.

The Government heartily endorses the Committee's appeal to all Canadians to support the relief effort with their contributions. With the new allocation I have mentioned, the Government's contributions to relief and transport activities now come close to \$3 million.

The Committee's sixth recommendation deals with assistance to children from stricken areas. The Canadian Hercules aircraft stationed on the island of Fernando Po has been authorized to transport refugees to other neighbouring countries which are ready to welcome them. These people have been brought out from the rebel area by the Red Cross in order that they can be given better care. The Government has been happy to assist the International Red Cross in moving them to other countries. As to bringing children from the rebel area to Canada, the Government does not think it wise to press this idea in the face of the adverse views of those directly concerned.

The Government accepts the Committee's view that Canada should not sell arms to either side in this conflict. Indeed, as Hon. Members know, that has been the Government's policy throughout.

In its eighth recommendation the Committee urged the Government to intensify its efforts to persuade the parties to accept mediation. The caution attached by the Committee to this point is sound: that we should not operate in such a way as to jeopardize the effectiveness of our relief efforts. There are, as we have said, limitations on the Government's action on this essentially political question; but I can assure the House that within these limits we shall work strenuously for a peaceful settlement of this dispute.

On the proposal that Canada should contribute to an eventual peace-keeping force in Nigeria, I think it is premature to offer comment before a settlement or ceasefire has been achieved or before the terms of any peace-keeping operation are known. I may add this, however: As is well known, Canada has always taken a positive look at peacekeeping proposals, and I can assure the House that any proposals in respect of the Nigerian situation will be given prompt and careful consideration by the Government.

An amendment has been proposed to the Committee's report, Mr. Speaker, which would oblige the Government to take this question to the United Nations, to the General Assembly or to the Third Committee. As the Prime Minister explained this afternoon, and as has been made clear before, following intensive study of the matter we have come to the conclusion that this is neither a practical nor a useful initiative. Any proposal to have the matter discussed at the United Nations would not gain more than minimal support. For that reason alone an initiative would not be effective and would have no helpful influence on the situation. Moreover, if we were to press on regardless of the lack of support, Canada's position in the world body would be affected and the possibility of our taking useful steps on this or other matters would be seriously reduced.

In opening this debate this afternoon the Prime Minister spoke these words, with which I concur entirely:

" - I remain convinced that an attempt to inscribe the Nigerian conflict on the agenda of the General Assembly would not only be bitterly resented by the Nigerian Government and the member states of the Organization of African Unity, but would also be totally unsuccessful -"

He also said:

"Should we attempt to employ a General Assembly committee for such a discussion, conceding for the moment that we could do so, which is not entirely clear, our efforts would prove not only divisive but totally counter-productive."

I am asking, in the face of these statements, do Hon. Members think we should persist when the consequences of our actions would be those put forward today by the Prime Minister?

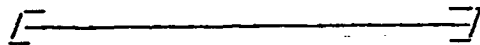
The Prime Minister said that we would incur the hostility and opposition of African states, and that would jeopardize our policy of dealing with the situation effectively. We would probably be told that we were not welcome in providing relief assistance in Nigeria, and our observer would probably be told to go home.

And now may I comment on the suggestion that we should intervene to press Britain, the U.S.S.R. and others to cease their sales of arms to the participants in this war? I am sure this House would be gratified if all the countries currently supplying arms to the two sides would cease to do so, and, if I thought that action by Canada would accomplish this, I would not hesitate to propose it. This is however a matter of policy for each government to establish for itself. It is well known that the French Government has denied it provides arms to the rebels. Moreover I ask the Members of the House this question: Would the situation be improved if external pressure caused the British Government to cease all its arms supplies to Nigeria, leaving the field open to the U.S.S.R. to become its principal source?

I should like to refer again to the hope, widely felt by the Canadian people, that this civil war can be brought to an end. I said earlier that the achievement of a peaceful negotiated settlement does not depend on the provision of facilities or the making of proposals by outsiders. Canada stands ready to be of assistance if that would be helpful; and I hope that the responsible course we have followed enhances the possibility of our playing a useful role. Whether any progress can be made toward peace depends, however, on the parties to the dispute. In particular, in my view, it depends on the Nigerian Government providing sufficiently convincing guarantees to the Ibos of their security after the conclusion of hostilities, and on the willingness of the rebels to envisage a negotiated settlement short of complete independence from Nigeria. To advocate a negotiated settlement and secession is a contradiction in terms. I would therefore urge those Canadians who have influence with the rebel side, both in this House and outside, to press them toward conciliation, and thus toward a peaceful settlement. And I call on the parties to this tragic civil war to show their willingness to negotiate positively, in order that with the assistance of the OAU or the Commonwealth Secretariat, a peaceful settlement can be achieved.

In conclusion may I restate the basic principles which have guided the Canadian Government's policy in this matter and which will continue to guide that policy:

1. The Government will continue to provide assistance generously to meet the needs of the people of Nigeria as a whole.
2. We will maintain close liaison with the legitimate government of Nigeria in order to provide relief to the population under its control.
3. We will continue to urge the secessionist authorities to co-operate in arrangements acceptable to the Nigerian Government for the relief of the population under rebel control.
4. The Government will be ready, when this tragic conflict is over, to co-operate with the Nigerian Government in the important tasks of reconstruction and rehabilitation it will face.
5. We will work toward a better international legal framework within which humanitarian assistance can be provided to people affected by civil conflict.
6. The Government will not violate international law by supporting or endorsing any move, bilateral or multilateral, which will constitute intervention in Nigerian internal affairs.
7. We will continue to call upon both sides in the conflict to negotiate their differences.
8. The Government will vigorously support any conciliation effort which may develop under the auspices of the OAU, the Commonwealth Secretariat or any other body acceptable to the parties.
9. We will stand ready to assist, if so desired by both parties, in promoting a negotiated settlement.



On conclusion of this statement, the following exchange took place:

Mr. Stanfield: The Minister indicated he would answer questions when he had finished. I wonder whether he would indicate what he meant when he said this Government would establish a better international framework to deal with civil conflicts, and whether he would indicate when he proposes to start on this, if not tomorrow?

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Mr. Sharp: This has already been started. The words I used were: "We will work toward a better international legal framework within which humanitarian assistance can be provided to peoples affected by civil conflict." That is what we are doing in the United Nations today.

Mr. MacDonald (Egmont): In connection with the Minister's remarks about the observer team, I was wondering whether the suggestion had been explored that the team should be expanded, as Nigeria has requested, and that it should use its own vehicles, with the possibility of seeing all the areas presently involved in the conflict. The Minister did not say whether inquiries had been made in this direction.

Mr. Sharp: The Hon. Member may recall that when the team itself suggested that its operations should be expanded I supported that idea in a cable to the authorities in Lagos.

Mr. MacDonald (Egmont): Would the Minister answer the other part of the question with regard to the vehicles and the expansion of the team?

Mr Sharp: We made it clear we would be prepared to help in that respect.

Mr. Brewin: Has the Minister made inquiries into the question of whether the airport at Calabar, in Eastern Nigeria, a region presently occupied by the federal forces, is not perfectly capable of accepting Hercules aircraft on frequent and repeated flights? It is one of the major international airports there.

Mr. Sharp: Yes, Mr. Speaker. Before I came to the House today I asked the Minister of National Defence (Mr. Cadieux) if he would give me an account of the position there, and I shall read the relevant sentence:

"Beginning 17 October, the Canadian reconnaissance team was permitted a survey of Calabar and Enugu airfields in Nigeria. Calabar was found to be acceptable by the Canadian team for limited Hercules operations. However, sustained operations would have seriously damaged the runway, which was not acceptable to the FMG."
