

FOR PEACE AND FREEDOM

Will Britain act to stop genocide in Biafra?

The invasion of the Ibo heartland by Federal Nigeria is under way, without a murmur of public protest from the British Government. Awgu, 20 miles from Enugu, was attacked almost a month ago in what probably marked the start of the "final push"—an assumption confirmed by Alexander Mitchell and Tony Geraghty's harrowing report in the *Sunday Times* on July 28. It is now merely a matter of time: not only before the Addis Ababa talks completely break down, but also before the Ibos are slaughtered in hundreds of thousands by arms as well as hunger, but also before the wavering regime of General Gowon, papering as it does the constitutional cracks in the Federal union, starts to collapse.

It is this last reality which is probably the main factor holding the Federals back from announcing an attack on the East Central region—while the state of the roads during the current rainy season, and the desire to keep appearances while the Addis Ababa Conference labours to a dead-end, are probably the main reasons Federal entry into Biafra is being conducted erosively rather than by large-scale invasion. As for the policy of the British Government, the fact of a recent "secret" letter counselling restraint on Gowon got leaked to *Observer*, August 11) suggests that Harold Wilson is more concerned with tidying his home front than with having any influence on Federal

Indeed, Wilson probably recognises by now that the British Government has had an almost negligible influence, partly because it was dealing with only one group in a Federal union of considerable ethnic complexity, partly because it could only affect the so-called "moderates"—and it is they who are now weakening. Gowon's alleged restraint on a commander like Adekunle, responsible for military action in the southern parts of Biafra—a Sandhurst officer with his second eye fixed covetously on the central command in Lagos, a man so confident in victory that he can afford, for the benefit of British TV cameras, to treat captured Ibos patronisingly like erring piccaninnies—must be somewhat similar to Wilson's own restraint on Gowon. The degree of control is in both cases marginal.

Sanctuary

That there is potentially a real lever of British influence—even at the present time—cannot be denied. But for it to be of any value at all, the Government must declare that (1) it realises the Federals are pursuing a line of attack and argument (exemplified by statements at the Kampala and Addis Ababa talks that there can be no discussion before renunciation of Biafran secession) that will lead to military conquest of the Ibo heartland, and (2) that this is completely indefensible. There is no obligation for the British Government formally to recognise Biafra—indeed, this might be the final folly at this stage—but only to recognise the reality of a situation in which the free passage of humanitarian aid is the sole immediate requirement.

The British Government has already acknowledged, if only by default, the shame of Biafran as well as Nigerian starvation. This realisation of human need has to be substantiated with the

most vital recognition of all: that of a sanctuary for dying people driven to the wall. If a statement by the British Government, demanding that Nigerian troops halt their invasion, were to have no effect on the Federal advance, what is to be done? Withdrawal of arms-supplies is, *on its own*, as empty a gesture now as it was a vital necessity a year ago. At that time, such action on the part of the British Government would have indicated the earnestness of Britain's role as a "mediator," and that role would have been accepted quickly by the Ibos and, probably later on, by the Federal forces. With the situation as it is at the moment, however, any halt in arms-supplies logically demands simultaneous withdrawal of British capital investment and foreign aid from Federal Nigeria.

All sorts of British interests in Nigeria would suffer as a result of such sanctions—but none is likely to deteriorate to a greater extent than Britain's reputation on the African continent already has. Felix Houphouet-Boigny, President of the Ivory Coast, expressed the point very forcefully—and significantly took Rhodesia as his context—in his statement in May on the eve of the Ivory Coast's recognition of Biafra:

"I have always been opposed to the use of violence in Rhodesia for two reasons: first of all from political conviction . . . and because I know surely that the English would never accept going to war against their white brothers in Rhodesia. I cannot condemn fratricidal conflict in Nigeria and approve of it in Rhodesia . . . From this premise I hardly understand, and find it difficult to accept, the attitude of the British Government towards the people of Biafra."

"That the British Government, leader of the Commonwealth, whose duty it should have been in the face of such a terrible drama, to

play the role of mediator: that England, hostile to all use of violence in Rhodesia: that England, which had graciously recognised the independence of Ireland . . . should furnish the most lethal weapons for the massacre of Biafrans, who themselves are citizens of the Commonwealth, surpasses our comprehension."

Mistrust

Inevitably, recommendations made to any party directly involved in this conflict have an air of unreality about them. Just as the false announcement during the Niamey Conference, to the effect that agreement had been reached on a land-corridor for aid, almost seemed to herald the end of the war, so recent news that Red Cross planes are being deliberately fired on seems to betoken the last squalid and inhuman straw designed to break not only the ill-fated Addis Ababa Conference but close on seven million men, women, and children. In a war of such incongruity there can be neither cures nor solutions until some gesture or statement, cognizant of the devastation of the situation and its implication for the world, breaks the closed circle of mistrust and fear.

By declaring its support simply for the Biafran "case" without further definition, the French Government clearly increased the viciousness of the circle. By demanding Federal acceptance of an Ibo "sanctuary," and by re-stating its offer of a Commonwealth force to supervise *not* a cease-fire but, in this case, a detente, a breathing space before a true constitutional conference which would discuss all the doubts and fears surrounding such terms as "secession" and "federation," the British Government *could* put itself in a position to break the deadlock. And public pressure could *force* the Government to make the effort.

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Nixon's nuclear game of poker

Richard Nixon has implied that he would, if elected President, threaten to use nuclear weapons against North Vietnam, so as to force Hanoi to negotiate.

This is what a tape-recorded address to Southern delegates last week suggests. Louis Heren, *Times* correspondent, interprets it this way, and so does Nguyen Thanh Le, North Vietnamese spokesman at the Paris talks.

"How do you bring a war to a conclusion? I'll tell you how Korea was ended . . . Eisenhower let the word go out . . . to the Chinese and the North Koreans that he would not tolerate this continual ground war of attrition, and within a matter of months, they negotiated.

"Well, as far as negotiation is concerned (in Vietnam) that should be our position. We'll be militarily strong

and diplomatically strong . . . My point is that only by a strong position can you bring your enemy to negotiate. And that is the way we won the war."

"I played a little poker when I was in the Navy. I learnt something—it was very expensive (laughter)—I learnt this . . . when a guy didn't have the cards he talked awfully big. But when he had the cards, he just sat there—had that cold look in his eye.

"Now we've got the cards. But we've got to strengthen the United States—what we've got to do is walk softly and carry a big stick and we can have peace in this world. And that is what we are going to do." (Applause.)

That was how Nixon put it, speaking to seven Southern delegations last Tuesday. And the point is that President Eisenhower did "by all

accounts, threaten to use the bomb if the North Koreans did not negotiate" (Louis Heren, *The Times*, August 8).

On Monday this week, Nguyen Thanh Le at a Paris press conference strongly criticised Nixon, quoted newspaper reports of the speech, and said that before the Paris talks Nixon had always been in favour of intensifying and extending the war and bombing the North.

The threat implied by Nixon was denied on Monday by his press secretary Herbert Klein. "Neither publicly nor privately has he mentioned any use of nuclear weapons." This is consistent with the actual words of the talk, but completely misses the plain meaning. But maybe, say the optimists, Nixon didn't mean it, and was just trying to win Southern votes.

KEVIN MCGRATH