

New British warning to Lagos

The British Government is still insisting, in spite of the fierce three-pronged attack on the Biafrans by Nigerian Federal troops, that the present operation by the Federation's Third Commando Division under Colonel Benjamin Adekunle is not the long-anticipated "final assault" on the Ibo heartland.

Spokesmen in Whitehall were sticking firmly to this line last night, well aware that the "June 12 pledge" by the Foreign Secretary, Mr Stewart, would have to be carried out—involving the cutting off of the supply of British arms—if it became clear that the final assault was in fact under way.

Daily reports

Daily confidential reports are being sent to Mr Wilson at his cottage in the Scillies and to the Commonwealth Secretary, Mr Thomson, who is on holiday in Scotland, because of the grave new turn in the military situation. In Biafra the rebel radio is

reporting desperate resistance, with last-ditch stands by individual units, and another 200,000 Ibo refugees fleeing into the shrinking Biafran citadel after the recapture of Ikot Ekpene by the Federal forces.

In London Nigeria's chief roving ambassador has been called in for a second round of talks in which the Minister of State told him about the growing pressure of world opinion in the crisis.

Under British pressure, this envoy, Chief Anthony Enahoro, who has been leading the Nigerian delegation at the summit talks in Addis Ababa, has sent an urgent message to General Gowon in Lagos recommending that the Federal ban on an air corridor for relief supplies to Biafra should be lifted.

But what is the pressure that Britain has been able to use? Whitehall is notably coy on this one, but the only possible inference is that London has warned Lagos that the present airlift of British arms and ammunition—

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estimated to be running at the rate of 30 tons a week—could be cut off at a moment's notice if it became clear that a genocidal assault on the Ibos was under way.

This is what gives extraordinary importance to the sudden and unexpected meeting which was convened at the Commonwealth Office yesterday by Lord Shepherd.

Stalling action

When Chief Enahoro had conferred with him on Monday, for just over an hour, it was expected that Nigeria's roving envoy was going to fly on to Geneva for direct talks on the air corridor problem with the International Red Cross. By the next morning, however, it began to appear that the Nigerian Federal authorities were not prepared to give the green light to the relief planes after all.

This stalling action coincided with the records of fierce fighting in the Ikot peninsula. The com-

mander in the sector, Colonel Adekunle, is known as "The Scorpion," and is believed to be much more inclined to the "quick kill" strategy than his Federal commander, General Gowon.

The commitment given to the House of Commons by Mr Stewart on June 12 came during the defence, by the Foreign Secretary, of the British Government's rôle as a supplier of arms to the Federal side. He insisted this policy gave Britain special influence in Nigeria but added: "If we make the supposition that it were the intention of the Federal Government not merely to preserve the unity of Nigeria but to proceed without mercy with the slaughter or the starvation of the Ibo people... then the arguments which justified the policy we have so far pursued would fall."

Are these the words which, behind the scenes, have now been brought forcefully to the attention of Chief Enahoro? Is this why Nigeria's special Ambassa-

dor, who is perhaps the closest policy confidante of General Gowon, stayed on an extra day in London?

Whitehall is mum on this point. But it is clear that the tangled problem of the air corridor for relief supplies has caused impatience in London as well. The International Red Cross in Geneva had already accepted the Biafran offer of a neutralised airstrip for relief flights only. But Federal Nigeria now says this particular strip is too close to the fighting line.

Package plan

The Biafrans, however, appear to have only two strips and the other is the one they use for their own arms supplies. In Lagos last night a four-man delegation was leaving for Addis Ababa to put forward a "package plan" that would give the green light to an air corridor provided Biafra accepts a land corridor simultaneously.

The presence of Lord Hunt at

the London meeting yesterday indicates that the talks involved detailed examination of the land and air alternatives. Lord Hunt led the three-man mission to Nigeria in July and, as a military man, is well placed to advise the Minister on the limitations of the alternative plans missioner here.

Hella Pick reports from Geneva: Federal forces have damaged the airstrip which had been prepared in Biafran-held territory to receive the Red Cross airlift. This news apparently reached the International Red Cross last night shortly after the Federal Government had after all agreed to allow the airlift subject to adequate safeguards to ensure that only food and medical relief is flown in.

It is not known how extensive the damage to the airstrip has been or how soon it will now be possible to land aircraft there.

The Lagos Government seems to have given its consent to the airlift only after heavy pressure was applied, not merely by the British Government but also by the United States authorities.