

Federal forces poised to take Port Harcourt

LAGOS reports claimed yesterday that Federal Nigerian troops had captured Port Harcourt airport, breakaway Biafra's last link with the outside world, and were thrusting towards the city. It was the third such report last week; all were denied by Biafran officials in London. Then late last night, COLIN CHAPMAN, who is investigating Biafran claims of massacres by Federal troops, was able to send this cable from ...

Hell Sector, Port Harcourt, Saturday

GREEN-HELMETED troops of the Federal Nigerian Army today fought their way into Port Harcourt, strangling the last major stronghold of breakaway Biafra. I was with the marine commandos of the Third Division who were dodging sniper fire as they thrust up the road from the Shell-BP housing estate at Umo Koroshi to the runway of the airport.

Biafran supplies from the outside world are now cut: the airport can no longer be used.

I write this story on the roadside by St. Michael's Anglican church school, five miles from the city centre. The area is called Hell Sector. All around me is the stench of death and the terrible carnage of war. The corpses of recently slain Biafran troops lie slumped along the roadside. Soon, when the troops have moved on and night falls, the hovering vultures will swoop. Outside one of the graceful Shell houses, now roofless and windowless, are the bodies of two young watchboys, shot presumably for being too watchful.

But I see no evidence here of barbaric brutality, the massacre or genocide that is said to have occurred in other places; this is not, however, a traditional Ibo area.

The swimming pool at the Shell estate has been ruined by a direct hit. Blankets, mattresses and meagre food supplies lie dumped in the ditch because their owners decided to flee without their belongings.

I can see smoke from five big oil fires mushrooming into the sky. One is at the pipeline near the biggest refinery in West Africa, but the refinery itself—recaptured last week—is intact.

From the churchyard beside here a deafening barrage of artillery fire is let loose every few minutes from 105 metre howitzers. The fire is directed to an area beyond the airport which

Colonel Benjamin Adekunle, the tough 30-year-old commander of the Third Division, has called Sector Peter. "I called it Peter because of Saint Peter and the people there need salvation," he says.

The colonel is flamboyant and tough. He shouts abuse and encouragement at his troops with the same breath. "Fire together," he yelled at the artillery men and when one was out of turn Adekunle—known as the scorpion to his troops—went across and beat the unfortunate soldier across the bottom with his Louisville Slogger baseball bat.

The colonel told me as we walked under fire up to the front: "We started moving in to the city from the east at ten yesterday morning. We have neutralised Port Harcourt as a source of supply. We could go in now, but we do not want to kill a lot of people."

Adekunle says no plane has been able to land at the airport, though one of the big Constellations that come from Lisbon 17 hours away hovered over yesterday and went away. A small executive jet also took off yesterday. "Maybe it was Ojukwu," says the colonel.

The colonel says there has been no bombing for two weeks, but before leaving Calabar for a hundred-mile nightmare journey through the jungle and swamps to get here I saw two Ilyushins and a Russian Mig take off.

Adekunle does not underestimate his enemy. "They up and fight everywhere. I have absolute respect for the rebels. To minimise them is to ask for trouble. The Ibos have not got anything you would call individualism. They are very clannish and that is what is helping them now," he said. The colonel added: "We are going to become one country again, but we don't want to kill them all."

By the time this dispatch reaches London, Port Harcourt may well have fallen to Colonel Adekunle's forces.

There is no doubt the Federal Government want to achieve this in time for the Kampala peace talks next week-end.

In an earlier cable Colin Chapman described a visit to an Ibo village in the heartland of Biafra.

LIFE here has jarred abruptly to a standstill as this desperately tragic war enters its eleventh, perhaps conclusive, month.

Gone are the familiar sights—yams growing in cultivated Eastern Region fields, traders' vehicles on the roads, lively village markets.

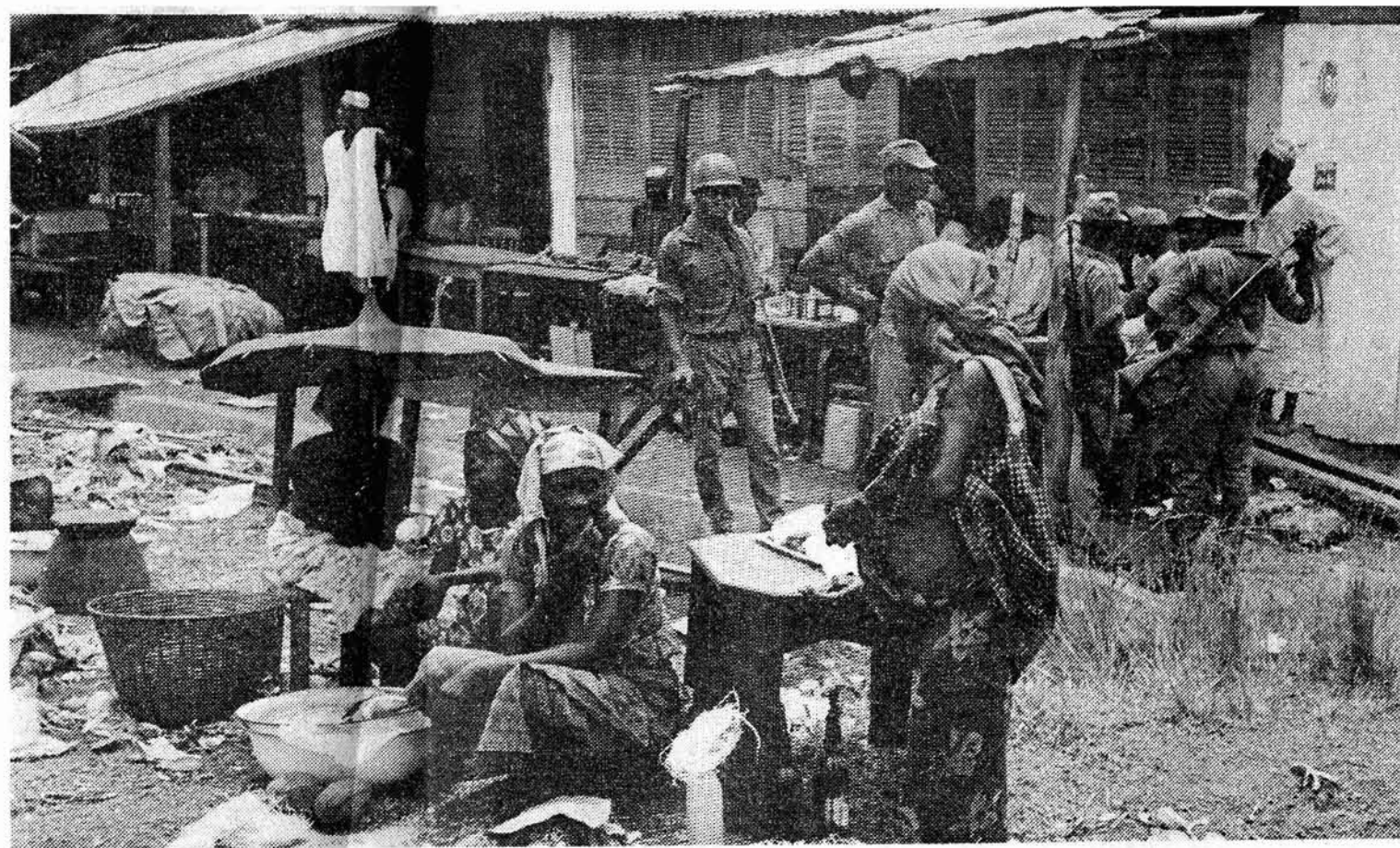
Gone, too, are the people, whether Biafran militia and refugees retreating from federal troops, or ordinary folk who have vanished in fear into the bush.

The rich green vegetation of the jungle is now reclaiming its own. Lush, tropical growth clambers and twines round the rafters and window frames of shattered buildings and crumbling homes. Everywhere there is utter devastation: the country is almost totally ravaged by war.

I drove for more than 140 miles through the heart of Iboland this week. Not long ago there were 300,000 people here—where have they gone? I passed through more than 30 villages. All were in ruins.

In many nothing moved. In others sometimes a woman or a child would appear as a pair of frightened eyes looking warily out from behind fallen masonry.

Only in one village did I find any normal life. The Ibos there—some of them able-bodied young men you would expect to see at the front—said they had fled bushwards but returned to "put their faith in God."



Stranded by war, Ibo women take refuge at a Red Cross camp at Nsukka