

TIMES FRIDAY MAY 17 1968

# Sad return of the Ibo refugees

## Toll of hunger and disease

From JOHN YOUNG—Enugu, May 16

Slowly and warily Ibo inhabitants of this area, which is now securely in Nigerian federal control, are trickling back into the villages from which they fled when fighting began. After months in the bush many are suffering from severe malnutrition, and disease is rampant.

I visited a roadside village about 10 miles from here where an American Red Cross nurse was dispensing food and medicine. She reckons to treat about 200 patients a day, and says that thousands more villagers are still hiding in the bush, convinced they will be shot by soldiers if they show themselves. Even those who have returned at first fled at the approach of vehicles. Only now are they gaining confidence and staying in the villages.

Their common characteristic is protein deficiency resulting from a diet consisting almost exclusively of yams and cassava. The nurse, Miss Dorlie Fairbanks, of California, described some of them as simply bones covered with skin. There are scabies, malaria, tuberculosis and a variety of stomach ailments.

### Ghost town

When I was there about 100 people clustered by the Red Cross van under the trees, the children particularly, with distended stomachs and match-stick limbs, showing obvious signs of severe hunger. They talked freely and described how they fled their homes at Christmas when federal troops pursued Biafrans down the road.

The local chief said that nine men and women from his village had been shot running out of their huts but it is generally difficult to associate the friendly, cheerful, well-disciplined troops with the horrific brutalities that have been described in some reports—although in the mid-west it may well be a very different story.

Enugu itself is still a ghost town, its wide pleasant steets littered with abandoned vehicles and lined with smashed and looted shops. Electricity and water have been partially restored but it is estimated that not more than 400 inhabitants have returned to this former capital of the breakaway republic since its capture by federal forces early last October.

On the surrounding hills proud new buildings, their windows shattered, afford a bitter reminder of growing prosperity nipped in the bud. In the luxurious Presidential Hotel an invitation to have "a jolly good weekend" surmounts the list of Biafran civil defence instructions. In a corner of Government House, where Colonel Ojukwu declared independence, a solitary soldier sits at a sewing machine. In the Parliament buildings hundreds of books lie in heaps on the library floor.

The federal front line is about 12 miles south but there has been no more than desultory action for the past month. This reinforces the impression that the federal government is content to hold present positions in the north and west, apart from clearing the Enugu-Onitsha road of wandering Biafran patrols. Once Port Harcourt is taken in the south they may well choose to await the outcome of the peace talks before advancing farther into densely populated Ibo territory with inevitable heavy casualties on both sides.

LAGOS, May 16.—Chief Anthony Enahoro, back home today after exploratory talks in London on the Nigerian conflict, said he doubted whether the federal authorities would welcome a foreign chairman and observers to the forthcoming full scale peace meeting with secessionist Biafra in Kampala, where the two sides have agreed to meet on May 23.

He told reporters at Lagos airport: "I doubt very much whether it would be acceptable to the Federal Government to admit a foreign chairman and observers to what after all is a meeting on Nigeria's internal problems."

The question of foreign observers and the chairmanship form two parts of a four-point agenda agreed upon in London. Others are conditions for ending hostilities, and arrangements for a permanent settlement of Nigeria's political difficulties in the wake of two military coups.

Chief Enahoro said the federal authorities were prepared to negotiate peace with Biafra, but secessionist leaders must equally be prepared to give up the independence they had seized last May.—*Reuter*.

### Refinery capture denied

Biafra has emphatically denied Nigerian claims to have captured the Shell-BP oil refinery in Port Harcourt, and to control the principal road leading north from the town, according to the Biafra overseas press division in Geneva, which quoted a war report received yesterday. This says:—

"There is no truth in the claim by Nigeria, reported by the B.B.C., that Nigerian troops control the oil refinery, or that they control any part of the road linking Port Harcourt with the north of Biafra. Elements of Nigerian troops, who attempted to enter Afam and to push on to Obigbo junction, 18 miles from Port Harcourt on the Port Harcourt-Aba road, were routed."

The report adds: "In this encounter Biafran armed forces captured a large quantity of British-made arms and ammunition. These include stores of 81mm. mortar bombs, artillery shells and automatic weapons. Details of the equipment captured are still coming in from the battle area."