

# The Ibo will to survive

BY OUR SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

ON THE BLACK AFRICAN landscape a single light flickered out its message. 12,000 feet above, the American pilot of the grey unmarked Super Constellation radioed back his acknowledgment. Behind him 12 tons of arms and ammunition creaked and shifted as he began his dangerous spiral down to land. Another load of the vital Lisbon-based airlift to breakaway Biafra was about to arrive.

Within minutes after touchdown the crates had been unloaded and the improvised landing strip again shrouded in anonymous darkness. Twelve months after independence secessionist Biafra is still getting supplies. Against the most extraordinary odds, the country to-day observes its first anniversary of independence. True, it is not a celebration. With General Gowon's Federal forces pressing hard on all fronts and a gloomy atmosphere overhanging the Kampala peace talks, it cannot be.

## Battle rages

The battle still rages round the clock for control of the vital city of Port Harcourt. In Onitsha, Federal forces encamped in the ruins of the once-important Niger River market town are still engaging important sections of Biafra's 80,000-strong army. In the east around Arochuku the Federals are pushing hard to establish themselves across the Cross River to begin what they believe will be the final assault on the Ibo heartland. For Biafra's Head of State, Lt.-Col. Odumegwu Ojukwu the military situation is more difficult now than it has been for a long time. His ill-equipped soldiers going into battle against General Gowon's men armed with all the British and Russian material they could wish for are at an almost suicidal disadvantage.

It is only the spirit of the Biafran soldiers that keeps them going,

the belief that victory for the Nigerians would mean certain death for the 8m. Ibos who form the majority of Biafra's people. There is no sign yet of any flagging of this spirit. Civilians are as committed as the army officers. Survival is what the past 10 months of bloody conflict has been about. The Biafrans would rather go down fighting than suffer a repeat of the pogroms of 1966 which sparked their breakaway from the Nigerian Federation.

The price the Biafrans are paying for this commitment is enormous. Upwards of 100,000 people have been killed since the



Ojukwu

war began, probably about half of them Biafran. Among civilians, hardships have been just as great. Nigeria's Russian MiGs and Illuyshins have flattened whole rows of houses, hospitals and market places. Lagos has admitted the bombing of non-military targets. Yet even since General Gowon's instructions to his pilots

to be more careful an estimated 500 civilians have been killed in raids here.

Industrial life in Biafra is now at almost a complete standstill. Only a little rubber is still leaving the country via Lisbon. Commercial activity is operating on a low level with markets offering mainly home-grown fruits and vegetables and a few manufactured products at high prices. The International Red Cross has estimated that of 6m. refugees in the country, some 600,000 are on the verge of dying from starvation. It has calculated, too, that some 200 tons of food would have to be transported into Biafra each day to keep all the refugees alive. Lagos has refused to give categorical assurances about the safety of relief aircraft.

Most food items are in fact still available in Biafra. The blockade has successfully halted most supplies, but the wily Ibo has built up an efficient smuggling market with neighbouring states. Consumer prices are spiralling. Before the war yams, the country's staple, could be bought for about 4s a tuber. Now they are 10s. Salt is very scarce. Chickens are £1 each. Beer on the rare occasions that it becomes available costs 13s a bottle.

## Petrol rational

Since the Federal attack on Port Harcourt, petrol rationing has been tightened up considerably. There is said to be 10m. gallons stockpiled around the country. In February Dr. Pius Okigbo, economic adviser to the Government, told me he thought there was enough to last Biafra for another year from that time. The pre-war price of 4s 6d has risen to 8s a gallon when available. Bicycles are becoming increasingly popular. The other alternative is to walk. With only about half the money back in circulation after the withdrawal of the Nigerian banknotes earlier this year, it is

UMUAHIA, BIAFRA, May 30, understandable that there is simply not enough money available for many people to be able to pay the increased prices.

Against this background one would expect that the Biafrans would be prepared to sue for peace at almost any price and that the pressures on Colonel Ojukwu to reach some sort of accommodation with Lagos would be enormous. The contrary is true. Everywhere there is a feeling that amounts almost to fatalism. Colonel Ojukwu has become the symbol of resistance against Nigerian brutality. The tales of atrocities committed by the Nigerian soldiers are too terrifying for the Biafran people ever to accept anything short of complete control over their internal security. The constant stream of refugees into the unoccupied areas from the parts of the country taken by the Nigerians bears testimony to the feelings that exist.

## Diplomatic aid

If the Kampala talks fail the prospects from here look like a continuation of this awful and fruitless war for a long time to come. The Biafrans cannot win a military victory. The Nigerians may be able to do so, but the cost will be enormous and even then a Nigerian victory will not solve the problem.

Tanzania, the Ivory Coast, Zambia and Gabon have already condemned the war and afforded diplomatic recognition to the Ojukwu regime. If a few more countries do so the pendulum could swing more in favour of Biafra and Britain might be under heavy pressure to halt the flow of arms to Lagos and to use the considerable influence of the U.K. High Commissioner, Sir David Hunt, to stop the fighting. Until that happens the world will have to bear witness to the creeping paralysis of both Nigeria and Biafra.