

NIGERIA

at the crossroads

CHUKWU AKUEGBO ONWU

THE events which followed Nigeria's army coup thirteen months ago have certainly left the country at the cross-roads. Political theorists and well-meaning patriots have not exhausted themselves in an effort to find the way ahead of this Africa's largest and most developed state among the free nations of the continent.

Tribal issues rather than political or economic ones have aggravated the national problem. The January coup, apparently hailed by the entire population, was dubbed a sectional, rather than a national exercise, aimed at salvaging the masses from the clutches of corrupt politicians. It had been manipulated, critics say with tribal sentiments, by the most dynamic of the country's ethnic groups - the Ibos, some 12 million of whom inhabit the Eastern Region. Their activities in two main fields, political and economic, in the country's life had constituted a threat to the existence of their rivals in their own home regions. The killing of two Premiers of each of the Northern and Western Regions and Prime Minister Abubakar Tafawa Balewa (a Northerner) lent much weight to this argument.

The kidnapping of the Supreme Commander Aguiyi-Ironsi, only recently declared dead and a large number of Southern army officers (mostly Ibos) in July 1966 counter-coup by Northern soldiers - dominant group on the nation's army - followed as a quick reprisal. In August of the same year the revenge was driven home by the massacre of most Ibo elements resident in the Northern towns with the greatest atrocities in Kano, Zaria and Kaduna. Eastern official figures put the slain at 30,000. Frightened and helpless the Ibos began an exodus from all sections of the federations back to their own homes.

Supreme Commander Lt.Col. Yakubu Gowon, the Hausa and successor to Ironsi, made futile pleas to stop the march-out, accompanied by the repatriation from the East of all non-Easterners, mainly Northern Hausas and Yoruba Westerners on the order of the East Regional Governor Lt.Col. Ojukwu.

There is little doubt that the encounter is mainly between the Hausas and the Ibos and the feudal North versus the progressive South in general.

The stabilising effect which the two remaining Regions, West and the Mid-West would have supplied is just not effective enough. The West just free from internal election strife of 1964 which has set the present ball rolling, remains silent when not equivocal about its stand. Both Regions, of course, are militarily too weak to be prepared to risk offending the North, whose troops are in virtual occupation of the two regions, refusing to budge in spite of the national Supreme Council agreement to that effect in August 1966.

Laborious efforts are being made by what remains of the Federal Military Government to halt a total disintegration of the country. The chances of success are doubtful, if not negligible. The meet-

ing of minds among the ruling military personnel which Gowon has often preached as a prerequisite to the return of peace does not appear to have been effected in the rank and file.

Sticking to one's guns is an attitude which appears to be confounding the situation the more. Unequivocal atonement for the "pogrom" committed by Northern soldiers and civilian mobs, which the Easterners think could encourage them into forgetfulness, does not seem to be forthcoming from the Northern leadership and masses.

In the meantime the task of resettling runaway citizens in their respective Regions of origin is telling hard on the four Regional Military Governments, the East in particular. The economy faces the danger of slumping with the disruption of Federal services, following the desertion of their posts by the workers. The Railways, Electricity, Airways and other leading national boards and corporations are the worst hit. Most of them have been forced to maintain only skeleton services during the past five months.

THE urgent task of the moment is to evolve a new pattern of future association for the 55 million Nigerians. The choice is now between a Federation and a Confederation after Gowon had ruled out a Unitary set-up as "unworkable", and made vacillating utterances on the two alternatives. The sacking or suspension by Gowon of a committee set up by him late last year to explore the new modus vivendi was a mark of the panel's ineffectiveness.

Though the military leaders appear to have made up their differences at their Aburi, Ghana, meeting last January 5, subsequent events still point the way to a gloomy future, while the country is still left in the doldrums. Back from Ghana, East Military Governor Ojukwu still clings to his love for a Confederal system into which viewpoint he had pulled his people after the reprisals against them. In this stand Easterners are offering Ojukwu their unflinching support, apart from the lone voices of separatist agitators among the non-Ibo minorities in the Rivers area, demanding the setting up of a new state for them a demand already marked by bloody riots and said to have been North - inspired in a bid to drive a wedge between the Ibos and the other ethnic groups in the same Region.

But Gowon, said to be under the influence of his Northern advisers, maintains that the Accra conference endorsed the continuation of the federal system as at before the January 1966 coup, Northern leadership having switched from their immediate demand for a break-up (Confederation) after the coup to backing of a strong Federation. This shifting of ground is considered in diplomatic circles as being prompted by the Northerners' fear of being pushed into economic hardship in a dismembered Nigeria, since all their entire trade with the out-

side world would have to be done through the Southern sea-ports of Port Harcourt (East) and Lagos (West). The latter would eventually go with the Yorubos in the event of a break-up.

The East Military Governor is increasingly indicating his preference for a Confederal system. This is seen in his undisguised loss of faith in the existing federal services over the past six months. His latest act cutting the East from the six-year-old National Provident Fund is a pointer. So, too, is his demand that the Aburi "agreement" that the Regions "should move slightly apart" should be implemented without further delay. Ojukwu seemed to have won his way just before the Ghana talks. Regions had already set up their own training depots for army recruits who were all previously being trained in the Northern town of Zaria on a national level . . .

ONE factor makes the Nigerian political situation most complicated and uncertain Now. Tribalism, the biggest evil to retard

the nation's march, which the military regime aimed at eliminating from the nation's life, is now entrenched more than ever before as a result of the bloody events of 1966. Strictly speaking tribalism mostly existed in the rank and file of selfish politicians who peddled it for the purpose of catching tribal votes during elections, but now the stream of society life is almost irremediably polluted with the gallop of sectionalism.

Nigerians' co-existence in one integral country is a thought most desirable in principle. But human elements which these episodes of the last year have brought into play cannot be easily overlooked. That the peoples need separate spheres of activity now to cool off in the present circumstance there is no doubt. What is not clear is the fruit of this separation in the ultimate - whether it will lead to a peaceful re-association or an everlasting balkanization in which the rival tribal groups may either perish or survive in a world where inter-state and mutual co-operation is the order of the day.

To breach
the wall
of silence

ARTHUR BLAXALL

The case for specific legislation to meet the needs of Africa's blind and deaf:

The second of a series

A MOTHER once said to me: "T. was so different from my other children; he took no notice when I used his name, and even when I turned his face towards me there was no response, only wide open eyes looking deep into mine as if enquiring what it was all about . . . then it dawned on me: T. was not hearing . . . there was a great wall of silence between us; and now I am asking you, Mr. Blaxall, how can I get through that barrier?" That is the great question which deafness sets up: how to establish communication, without which the deaf child will grow up a stranger in a hard world where there is little time given to those who are handicapped in the struggle for existence.

It is because of inability to hear the voice of parents and teachers that a deaf child remains dumb - isolation is complete, except that as years pass, and the child grows, a very limited means of communi-

cation by gesture develops, recognised only by the closest circle of acquaintances. It was the use of such gestures among a group of deaf-mutes in Paris that led a priest to think deeply: cannot these crude gestures be developed, even as speech and writing has grown through the ages. Abbe L'Epee (for that was his name) lived some 300 years ago but is still revered as the pioneer educator of the totally deaf. He devised a system of letters formed by the fingers, and numerous meaningful gestures. Educators from other countries visited his school in Paris, improvements were suggested and adopted.

At the beginning of the 19th century educationalists in Germany woke up to the fact that human speech is a very precise and deliberate achievement. Sounds are produced by specific movements of lips, tongue and throat, to which are added facial expressions. The importance of this for the deaf was quickly appreciated - if those whose hearing mechanism is at fault can follow language produced by fingers, can they not also follow the face and throat movements of ordinary speech? Experiments proved successful with the result that the Wall of Silence has been breached.

BUT it is a difficult and costly process. Teachers who are drawn to give their lives to the education of the deaf must have specialised training. Results will vary greatly: the most intelligent pupils respond quickly giving great joy; slower children call for patience almost beyond endurance, but when understanding does come the light in the deaf child's eyes repays the months and years of struggle.

There are many, many other aspects of deafness which cannot be dealt with in such a brief note. There are grades of deafness -

born-deaf: deafened; hard-of-hearing, and so on. Also, there are also those with additional handicaps as well as deafness: the epileptic deaf; those both deaf and blind; deaf cripples; each calling for particular skill and infinite love, with deafness always the basic disability. There are organisations such as the Royal Commonwealth Society for the Deaf, and the World Federation of the Deaf, who are surveying various countries where so far little has been done for the deaf: the measure of their success will depend largely on the response they receive from state and local authorities in countries concerned.

The two keys in the struggle against deafness are: research and personal service. Research is needed all the time because the fact that a child hears nothing is not self-evident at birth, as is the case with most physical disabilities, thus much valuable time is lost. Then when the fact of hearing loss is established research is needed to secure the best possible mechanical amplification of any degree of hearing which remains. Then there is constant need for consultation between the medical profession, educators and technical experts, calling for imaginative action by those in power and authority.

The challenge comes also in the realm of personal service: working with the deaf is exacting, at times even exasperating, and is rarely spectacular. Thus it all comes back to the note with which this series was started: a nation is known by the attention it gives to its handicapped citizens, which is costly in men and money.

Legislation to provide funds for special education, health services, and old-age pensions is essential, but the greatest need of all is for dedicated personal service which looks for nothing but the joy of releasing imprisoned personalities.