

Nuclear war: This is what ^{G.H.}

By A. W. JARVIE

AN international committee of experts in medical sciences and public health, has produced a report for the World Health Organisation which says boldly that there is no health service on earth that is geared to, or capable of, providing care for the injured or the dying during nuclear warfare.

The report comes hard on the heels of the British Medical Association's Board of Science and Education report on the Medical Effects of Nuclear War.

This report, which is now becoming a best seller in paperback, said: "The National Health Service could not deal with the casualties that might be expected following the detonation of a single one-megaton weapon over the United Kingdom." (A

one-megaton bomb, although small by thermonuclear standards, represents about an 80-fold increase over the 12.5 kilotons dropped on Hiroshima).

The BMA report added: "It follows that multiple nuclear explosions over several, possibly many, cities would force a breakdown in medical services across the country as a whole. We believe that such a weight of nuclear attack would cause the medical services in the country to collapse."

The WHO committee, experts from Sweden, the USSR, Austria, the Netherlands, United States, Nigeria, Japan, Venezuela, and

France, joined by Sir Douglas Black, the Scot who has recently retired as president of the Royal College of Physicians of London, representing the United Kingdom, looked at nuclear war on a global basis.

They met under the chairmanship of Professor Sune Bergstrom, one of the three winners of the Nobel Prize for physiology and medicine last year, and they calculated the consequences of three hypothetical situations.

First, a single megaton bomb dropped on a city the size of London "would kill more than 1,500,000 people and injure as many."

Secondly, a war using small tactical weapons, totalling 20 megatons, and limited to military

targets in central Europe, "would exact a toll of about 9,000,000 dead and seriously injured, of whom 8,000,000 would be civilians."

Also there would be about the same number of people with less severe injuries. In other words, a total of 18,000,000 casualties.

Thirdly, a full-scale war with 10,000 megatons of nuclear power, which is just half the world's stockpile, unleashed "would result in about 1,150,000,000 dead and 1,100,000,000 people injured."

The experts add: "Altogether about half the world's population would be the immediate victims of war."

The picture the report draws is not only of disease, death, and destruction but also of damage to the environment as well as collapse of the world's economic,

overkill' means ^{31/5/83}

cial, and political structure in wake of nuclear conflagration.

Rescue work would be scarcely better than makeshift with the death rate of health workers greater than that of the general population because of their exposure to radiation, disease, and other hazards, "with the result that the majority of casualties would probably be left without medical attention of any kind."

The committee of experts was established following the adoption of a World Health Assembly resolution which reflected "the growing concern of physicians and other health workers in many countries at the mounting danger of thermonuclear war and the consequences of war for all

countries of the world without exception."

They point out the limitations of treatment of the injured by stating that the number of people with burns would range from 13,500 in a bombing of the Hiroshima type to 60,000,000 in a nuclear war.

"Yet the United States has facilities to treat no more than 2000 severe burns, and Western Europe approximately 1500."

The experts also point out that to save the lives of four persons following a case in France of accidental exposure to radiation, from 50 to 100 transfusions of blood cells and heavy doses of antibiotics and antimyotics were required for each victim.

Treatment of that nature could at best be given to very few, if any, in the aftermath of nuclear war.

Finally the experts state that as a result of the breakdown of health services, a number of diseases, among them cancer, would occur in epidemic form throughout the world. In North America, Western Europe, and the Soviet Union alone, the estimate there would be 12,000,000 additional cases of cancer, particularly leukemia and cancer of the thyroid.



Nagasaki H-blast, 1945: casualties were numbered in thousands, as opposed to hundreds of millions.