

# Defence

## WHO details effects of nuclear war \*

No health service in any area of the world would be capable of dealing adequately with the hundreds of thousands of people seriously injured by even a single one-megaton nuclear bomb. That is the conclusion of a World Health Organisation report on the effects of nuclear war on health and health services.

The report, prepared by an international committee of experts in medical sciences and public health, considered three possible scenarios.

The first would involve detonation of a one-megaton bomb over a large city. This, says the report, would kill more than 1.5 million people and injure as many; the second, involving 'limited' nuclear war with smaller tactical nuclear weapons totalling 20 megatons, would claim a total of nine million lives; and the third, an 'all-out' nuclear war, using at least half of present nuclear stockpiles (approximately 10,000 megatons) would result in more than 1,000 million deaths and 1,000 million injured people.

The committee concluded that the only approach to the treatment of the health effects of nuclear explosions is 'primary prevention' or, in effect, 'the prevention of atomic war.' *'Effects of nuclear war on health and health services,' WHO, HMSO, 51 Nine Elms Lane, London SW8 5DR, £8.*

Scotsman 22, 3, 84

86 Morningside Drive, Edinburgh, March 15, 1984.

Sir, — Your report (March 14) on Sir Leslie Mavor's Edinburgh lecture on Civil Defence shows up weaknesses, inconsistencies and gaps in the Air Marshal's arguments.

While seeming to support the claim that nuclear deterrence works, he cites as the main justification for Civil Defence the risk that it will fail: "As long as armaments exist it is impossible positively to guarantee there will be no war." But don't those who support current nuclear policies do so in the secure belief that they do prevent war? If they are not foolproof after all is it sensible to rely on policies with such a ludicrously high cost of failure?

Sir Leslie is right to imply that the Government has not taken Civil Defence seriously but he does not seem to appreciate that it cannot possibly do so, because to spend large sums of money on it would (rightly) undermine public faith in nuclear deterrence. Sir Leslie should be arguing for a non-nuclear defence policy in which Civil Defence could play a more sensible part.

A further reason why a nuclear-armed Government cannot have large-scale Civil Defence provision (leaving aside the usefulness or otherwise of it) is

that, in the presence of modern highly accurate nuclear weapons like Cruise and Trident, any attempt to move the population into shelters in a period of tension would invite nuclear attack as it would look like a preparation for a first strike on the enemy.

Sir Leslie is not reported as giving any indication as to how his thoughts on Civil Defence might have been updated in relation to the recent discovery of the "nuclear winter" effect in the aftermath of nuclear war. This is the phenomenon by which even a relatively "small" nuclear strike would give rise to so much smoke from fires that the resultant blacking-out of the sun's rays would cause severe climatic changes with months of freezing darkness like a Siberian winter over much of the earth.

This "nuclear winter" would affect the aggressor as much as the attacked and shows more clearly than ever the absolute uselessness of nuclear weapons as instruments of defence policy.

The Air Marshal singles out for approbrium medical critics of defence policy — perhaps an indication that their attacks have been right on target. Readers should not be misled into thinking that such medical critics form only a small minority of their profession.

argues that nuclear weapons pose by far the greatest public health threat today. Any real protection against them lies not in pathetic whitewash-and-show-vel efforts at Civil Defence when it is already too late, but in serious and urgent efforts at prevention through nuclear disarmament. We could start in this country by supporting a multilateral nuclear freeze.

(Dr) J. A. T. Dyer, Press Officer, Medical Campaign Against Nuclear Weapons, Edinburgh.

58 Dick Gardens, Whitburn, West Lothian, March 15, 1984

Sir, — While I do not doubt the sincerity of the views expressed by Sir Leslie Mavor, Britain's Civil Defence supremo, during his recent Mountbatten Lecture, I feel compelled to say the man is living in a fool's paradise. It is not being defeatist to suggest that a nuclear war will destroy every living thing on this planet, it is in fact a rationale which an increasing number of scientists are coming to accept.

As for Sir Leslie's statement that "it is always prudent to approach the advice of scientists with a healthy scepticism," I doubt if the inhabitants of Hiroshima and Nagasaki —

those who are still around would agree with him. And wonders if Sir Leslie would care to argue with the findings of a BMA research team which concluded it would cost a billion to blast-proof Britain slightly more than the £70 million the Conservatives allocated to Civil Defence a year.

It's easy to dismiss "the cast of meteorological things come after a nuclear attack but I would argue that findings of Dr Carl Sagan amongst others who have tried out detailed experiments and are now convinced a nuclear war (even a limited one) would wreak horrific long destruction and precipitate nuclear winter, are far serious to be ignored. Sagan's findings were published in October 1983 and so far provoked little response from the Government.

Could it be, perhaps, despite all the Colonel-style bravado of the Defence lobby, their effort nothing more than a gross public relations exercise designed to make everyone a little better, but serving a practical purpose whatsoever? Sir Leslie Mavor's curmishal of fundamental considerations hardly inspire confidence.

Neil Dryst