

Double-talk on civil defence

If Western governments were more ready to acknowledge that there can be no effective civil defence against all-out nuclear attack, their forward planning would be less easily and less often ridiculed.

THE most haunting question about the prospect of nuclear war is what it has been since 1945 — will the survivors envy the dead? And one thing is certain: if it should ever come to nuclear war, many will. That is the spirit in which professional groups in North America and Western Europe have recently been carrying out formal studies of the likely consequences of nuclear warfare for people at large and for professional people in particular. In Britain, the Royal College of Nursing is the latest professional body to publish an account of what doomsday would be like, and how nurses in particular would be affected (*Nuclear War: civil defence planning — the implications for nursing*). To remark that the argument is familiar is not to demean it. That the general effect of the document now published is yet another demonstration of the futility of civil defence against determined nuclear attack is not the nurses' fault, but the government's.

The familiar argument is simple. Cause a megaton explosion above a major city (the nurses have chosen Bristol) and use published data on the effects of nuclear explosions on people and buildings to calculate the casualties from blast, burns and radiation. Bristol, a compact city of 572,000 people, turns out to be a handy target. Blast alone would kill 250,000 people and injure a further 85,000. Deaths from burns and prompt radiation would no doubt account for half the survivors. The longer-term damage done by fallout would therefore concern at most a quarter of the original population. Given the geography of the city, the nurses' working party concludes that only 328 nurses would be left alive and uninjured to cope with say 100,000 casualties. In short, a single megaton explosion over Bristol would put the city out of action and make health care ineffectual. Similar explosions elsewhere would bring the whole of Britain to a halt.

This conclusion is now unremarkable, as is the legitimate extension which supposes that if appropriate megaton weapons were exploded over other major cities, a handful of well aimed bombs would put paid to a sizeable fraction of the British population and make life for the remainder virtually impossible. So is the nurses' conclusion that the British Government's plans to deal with the immediate effects of a nuclear war are "totally inadequate". But no amount of planning could ensure that a densely populated country such as any in Western Europe could survive a determined attack with nuclear weapons. It would be simplest if British nurses and European governments were to admit that much.

Ridicule

The British Government is especially open to ridicule for its deliberate vagueness on this point. Civil defence planning is embodied in a series of detailed instructions to local and other public authorities which, among other things, describes a system of regional government to be set up in the days preceding a nuclear attack and arrangements for storing food and other essential supplies for use when bombs were no longer exploding. There are no plans for evacuating major cities — people would be advised or even compelled to stay put — but some essential workers, health-care professionals in particular, would be dispersed away from potential targets. Advice to the general public consists of a pamphlet called *Protect and Survive*, which offers some homespun advice about protection from fire and fallout which, the nurses now say, gives a "naive and misleading representation" of how effective these measures would be. One of the points on which the

whole plan has been criticized is the assumption that there might be up to two weeks' warning of a nuclear attack. The nurses, like others before them, wrongly think that to be a kind of joke.

Preparation

The British Government and others like it have only themselves to blame if people conclude that preparations for civil defence against nuclear attack are pointless. If the objective is to preserve something against the consequences of a determined nuclear attack, the most that might be justified is the protection of some kind of nucleus of public administration on the off-chance that there is something left to administer. At least in densely populated Western Europe, no other conclusion makes sense. But this depressing argument rests on the false assumption that the objective of preparations for civil defence is to protect a population against an all-out nuclear attack. Is that the only possibility? The nurses' working party said last week that it had considered an attack consisting simply of a single nuclear explosion, perhaps by accident or as a warning, only to dismiss it. That was rash of them. For nuclear attacks with a few nuclear weapons — even just one of them — are likely to be inescapable features of any approach to full-scale nuclear war.

This is how the nurses (and similar professional groups) should have argued. The armed division of Europe is the most likely trigger for international nuclear conflict. Moreover, conventional warfare of some kind is an almost certain prelude and could be prolonged — both sides would be restrained from decisive encounters for fear of the escalation that would follow. But if events were to get out of hand, perhaps because one side feared conventional defeat or because nuclear weapons had been used on the battlefield, the point might be reached for a deliberate threat to broaden the conflict, perhaps by mounting a deliberate nuclear attack on some strategic military target, an airfield or a missile base. By definition, such targets will be sited away from centres of population. Even in a country such as Britain, the consequences of such an attack, while calamitous, would not be catastrophic. Prompt deaths might be measured in tens of thousands, not in millions, while fallout would be the chief hazard for the majority of the population out of sight of the fireball. The British Government's plans for civil defence, would nevertheless serve well enough to minimize the damage done by such attacks. Civil defence might even provide a government with an opportunity to consider what next to do.

Truth

It is possible that the British Government has already recognized that its civil defence plans would not serve their declared purpose of the protection of the population against an all-out attack but would provide protection and room for manoeuvre in other circumstances. The government may also have concluded that it dare not say so for fear of driving people to the unpalatable conclusion that defence against all-out nuclear attack is impracticable. But there is nothing new in that, and no good purpose to be served by pretending otherwise. On the contrary, by its persistent ambiguity about the circumstances in which civil defence might be relevant, the government is merely inviting derision. The revision of the tactless booklet *Protect and Survive*, now promised, should be an occasion to tell the truth. □