

# Civil defence update lessens nuclear fall-out

A MODERN Domesday Book landed with a thump on the desks of local government officials this month — 263 pages outlining the Government's plans and assumptions in the event of nuclear war.

Many local authorities, particularly in Scotland, have made it clear that they will have no truck with civil defence preparations, arguing that they create a misleading and over-optimistic impression of the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust. However, this major up-date in civil defence planning is highly revealing in terms of current official thinking on the subject, and according to Scientists Against Nuclear Arms it demonstrates a shift towards a slow acceptance of the realities on the part of the Government.

Dr Alan Longman, of SANA's Scottish group, argues that this shift is also accompanied by a willingness to approach the question in a more open and candid way.

"Similar documents from the 1950s were marked confidential and not for use by the Press," he said, adding: "Now, for the first time in any Government publication they have at least given sources — something that is basic to scientists, who tend to feel that if something isn't sourced it is to be doubted from the start."

So much for the credits. There are, however, debts to be accounted for. According to Longman there are serious flaws in two areas: while mentioning some sources of published material there are obvious gaps; and although official thinking has moved slightly closer to a more realistic acceptance of the consequences of nuclear war it still lags very far behind the views of most scientists, particularly over current thinking on the nuclear winter, the period of intense cold and dark which would be caused by the dense dust clouds thrown up after such a war.

A Government civil defence manual dating from 1956 suggested: "The plans of the public authorities would accordingly be based on a controlled resumption of activity in a large part of the fall-out area after about 48 hours." As scientists have discovered the full impact of radiation, the authorities have gradually lengthened their assessment of how long it would be before it was safe for survivors to emerge from the bunkers.

But this slow process of revision has got only as far as 14 days, a period most experts believe is scarcely more credible than the 48 hours assessment of the 1950s. "This concept of two weeks is utterly unrealistic," said Longman, arguing that a minimum of six weeks should be used as a basis for planning. With the modern tendency being for using greater numbers of nuclear weapons with smaller warheads, this would mean dust and debris would come down as fall-out sooner while it was still highly potent.

The entire document from the Scottish Home and Health Department, entitled "Consolidated Circular to Local Authorities on Emergency Planning," is virtually identical to the guidelines issued by the Home Office south of the Border. The civil defence part of it runs to 20 sections — covering everything from planning assump-

tions and local authority responsibilities to care of the homeless and emergency feeding. Individual sections cover fire and rescue services, the police and the armed forces. Missing from the current batch is a section on the health service, which is to follow later. A further five sections cover planning for peacetime emergencies.

While Longman welcomed the fact that the circular cited sources for its evidence he said there were glaring omissions, in particular the failure to mention the nuclear aftermath edition of *Ambio*, the environmental journal of the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences, which was regarded as one of the most authoritative documents produced on the subject.

A close reading of the guidelines revealed a number of areas which clashed with the findings of *Ambio* and other reliable sources of information. In particular, the circular failed to base itself on the standard practice of "worst case analysis" and in general seemed over-optimistic.

The section on drinking water, for example, is based, like the rest of the guidelines, on the principle of 14 days in the bunker. But even if this is accepted, it suggests storing one litre per person per day — whereas the more commonly accepted minimum required is 1.45 litres, he said.

It also speaks of radioactive contamination of water being a "relatively minor hazard" for survivors — an assumption flatly contradicted by *Ambio*, as is the claim in the section on food and agriculture that "scientific assessments suggest that the short-term ingestion hazards arising from radioactive contamination of food are relatively small, provided that simple precautions are taken to remove fall-out dust from unpackaged or growing crops."

He said the Government had at least revised their figures on the amount of protection ordinary homes would give from fall-out, which were previously based on the assumption that windows would not be broken. But the most significant omission from the mass of material was any recognition of the whole concept of the nuclear winter.

"SANA is concerned about this," he said. "It came out of a conference nine months ago. It is extremely important and was widely publicised, so it could have been inserted as an extra section."

"They have circulated to civil defence officers the views of one critic hostile to the concept of the nuclear winter, whose article was published only in the *Civil Defence* journal, whereas I could name half a dozen top experts who came down in favour of the nuclear winter and who have been widely published. The nuclear winter changes everything — it's as if we learned the rules of one game and then found ourselves playing quite a different one."

Nevertheless, overall he detected "a welcome movement — if too small a movement — in the direction of realism. There is this repeated implication that after 14 days we can just come out and rebuild again, but at least in some of the documents there is a recognition that there will be both short-term and long-term problems and there will be a need to reconcile these."

## 16/8/84 T. Circular on civil defence shows little change

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Department of Health plans to put the National Health Service on a war footing for conventional or nuclear attack have changed hardly at all in spite of fierce criticism from the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Nursing.

Both organizations last year criticized the previous plans as ineffective, with the BMA stating that effective regional or national planning for nuclear war was impossible.

The existing plans were "far too rigid" and "seriously deficient" the BMA said. The revised circular however, sets out a structure similar to the old one, recommending the appointment of regional and district health directors, the identification of first-aid posts and casualty clearing centres.

Neither the BMA nor the RCN has yet considered the draft in detail, but it does not appear to answer the criticisms made. Instead the circular seems to provide less detail than before.

Beyond that, however, the Department of Health's circular is little changed from the previous plan. In its report on the medical effects of nuclear war, the BMA gave a warning that the psychological effect of a large scale nuclear attack would render many people, including those charged with organizing services, incapable of action.

● The Government's latest attempt to bring into line the local authorities who have refused to implement civil defence plans in the event of nuclear war is not likely to succeed (Pat Healy writes).

Another circular, bringing together previous emergency planning guidance from the Home Office with some updating, is being considered by local authority associations.

But the Association of Metropolitan Authorities, whose members include a majority of the 157 local authorities who have declared themselves nuclear-free zones, has decided to ignore the section on war planning.