

THE POLLUTION PROBLEM

The Red Cross may be regarded as being committed to the protection and improvement of the environment, as indicated in the League publication Panorama¹, which illustrated this fact by reporting that the Bulgarian Red Cross was among non-governmental organizations appointed to an inter-ministerial commission on environment recently set up by the Bulgarian Government in a series of anti-pollution measures.

In more general terms, there is a need for international legislation, and Dr. J. de Moerloose, Chief of the WHO Health Legislation Unit, recalls the successive efforts made by legislators in a paper from which we quote a few extracts²:

... In recent years, the number of legislative measures against air, water and soil pollution has grown enormously, and the following cannot pretend to be anything but the merest outline.

In a first period, up to the end of the nineteenth century, measures applied only to cities and took the form of very general sanitary provisions covering, for example, the production of thick smoke, the raising of livestock in towns, the location of certain trades harmful to the environment, etc.

The second period was that of the industrial revolution in England, France, Germany and some neighbouring countries in the nineteenth century. Blast furnaces, chemical industries and the steam engine were all sources of pollution and were often situated in the heart of a city or just outside it, without the least regard for the consequences to human health. It should be remembered that in those days no such thing as a ministry of health existed, and

¹ Geneva, 1971, No. 4.

² *World Health*, WHO, Geneva, 1971.

there was complete ignorance about the effects on health of certain industrial effluvia.

The third period, that of the twentieth century, is marked by the great development of industry in many countries and the fact that even agricultural nations are seeking to become industrialized.

In the matter of legislation, this third period may be divided into three stages. During the first stage, the legislative texts reflect the notion that, to be effective against air pollution, measures should be taken on three fronts: industrial pollution, pollution by fuel-burning power stations and domestic heating, and, more recently, pollution by motor vehicles. In the second stage, additional attention was focused on the need to combat the pollution of water, and in some countries measures were even taken against noise and vibrations. At the same time, the need for comprehensive rather than piecemeal legislation became apparent. The division of responsibilities among a number of independent or autonomous authorities tends to prevent any general solution of the problem. It will not do to pass legislation dealing solely with air pollution, especially as the same sources may pollute both air and water. During this second stage, the legislatures in a number of countries have set up a central body responsible for anti-pollution measures or at least for their co-ordination. Such authorities are almost always attached to the ministry of health, since their main purpose is, after all, to protect human health.

The third stage, the one we are now living in, is marked by the conviction of health authorities that the legislation of different countries must be harmonized. Air and water pollution know no frontiers. In Sweden, for instance, atmospheric pollution coming from the big industrial countries to the south has acidified the rain, with the result that the aquatic fauna in the Swedish lakes has been in part modified or even destroyed.

One of the difficulties that countries meet in formulating anti-pollution laws is to know what standard methods to apply in analysing and measuring pollution, what are acceptable norms of air purity, and the related question of where to fix the permissible limits of pollution. It is here the World Health Organization and other specialized international organizations can play a leading role.

Some uniformity in legislation is indispensable, if only to prevent "polluter" countries with lower production costs from obtaining an unfair advantage in international competition and the struggle for markets.

The accusation is often made that legislative measures are ineffective. In reply it may be said that, since the passing of the Clean Air Act in 1956, the number of sunny days in London has increased and the concentration of smoke has decreased by 80 per cent. During Pure Air Week in Paris in 1969, it was found that the emission of smoke could be stopped by organizing a check-up on 10,000 heating units. It should also be pointed out that a business concern can reduce the emission of hydrocarbons and eliminate smoke, often at very low cost.

At the present time, most countries are taking steps to fight pollution. New laws have recently been put into effect even in places such as Malta and Hong Kong, in geographical situations where one might expect the problem not to exist. Anti-pollution measures are being developed so rapidly at the present time that a first survey of existing legislation, published by WHO in 1963 and entitled *Air Pollution*, is completely out of date today.
