

BIOLOGICAL WARFARE

Relief of Fort Detrick

by our Washington Correspondent

THE sword of Damocles that for a year has been hanging over Fort Detrick, Maryland, may at the twelfth hour be beaten, as it were, into a ploughshare. Last week the Senate voted to grant the \$15 million needed by the National Institutes of Health to convert Fort Detrick's richly equipped laboratories from biological warfare to research on a range of biomedical problems.

Fort Detrick has been under sentence of closure since President Nixon's announcement a year ago that the United States would cease to conduct offensive biological research. But there have been persistent delays in deciding on the future of the research centre and its 1,300 scientific and technical staff, which even last week's vote in the Senate has not yet resolved. The Senate proposal to convert Fort Detrick to peaceful uses is in the form of an amendment to the appropriation bill for the Departments of Labor and of Health, Education and Welfare, to which the Senate has voted sums considerably in excess both of those requested by President Nixon and those voted by the House of Representatives: the fate of Fort Detrick now depends on whether the Senate amendment for its \$15 million conversion is accepted by the conferees from the House, who will be demanding overall cuts in the Senate's version of the bill.

A large number of government departments have looked Fort Detrick over and all have said they could use it with little or no modification. The proposals by the National Institutes of Health were judged the most meritorious and seem to have had the agreement in principle of Mr Robert Finch, previous Secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, and Dr Lee Dubridge, former science adviser to the President. By October, however, the Office of Management and Budget had turned a sour eye on the plan and the prospects of Fort Detrick took a sudden turn for the worse. The staff of the laboratories formed a group called the Committee of Concerned Scientists, to interest Congress in their future. A deputation to Senator Joseph Tydings's office in October heard the Senator call up the new Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, Mr Elliot Richardson, and learn from him that the cost of transferring Fort Detrick to the National Institutes of Health had low priority on his budget. Meanwhile the office of the other Maryland senator, Senator Charles Mathias, was finding that with the replacement of Dr Lee Dubridge by Dr Edward David, the attitude of the Office of Science and Technology towards the conversion plan had shifted from support to marked neutrality.

Morale among the staff at Fort Detrick, already shaken by the long uncertainty and dithering over the laboratory's future, took an abrupt turn for the worse after the Administration's change of mind. Uncertainty was so great that a "rumour list" pinned to a notice board in the Fort Detrick laboratories attracted 270 entries in a three week period. A member of the Committee of Concerned Scientists said last week that morale among the scientific staff "is now negative, if that is possible". He added, however, that all the staff are looking forward with great expectation to taking on the health research projects the National Institutes of Health would assign the laboratories, and that since

many scientists at Fort Detrick are in any case involved in basic research and some are already cooperating in projects with the National Cancer Institute, there would not be much of a shift.

Introducing the amendment on Fort Detrick into the Senate last week, Senator Mathias said that the physical facilities of Fort Detrick alone represent an investment of \$200 million; "It would be extremely short-sighted and costly to the Nation to allow the tremendous resources of Fort Detrick to be undermined by further delay or indecision. Once scattered, the installation's unique research teams, with talent and experience in many scientific disciplines, could not be reassembled." The core of Fort Detrick's scientific staff is 140 microbiologists, forty of whom have PhDs, supported by 150 specialists in other disciplines ranging from plant pathology to mathematical statistics. The special facilities at the Fort include negative pressure rooms designed to prevent dangerous micro-organisms being blown out of the laboratories, a million litre tank for studying aerosols, a plant for production of bacteria and viruses, and facilities for the long term holding of laboratory animals.

Though few of these facilities may be unique, all are scarce, and there is little doubt that much useful biomedical research could be undertaken with them. Among the proposals from the National Institutes of Health, which would provide employment for a total of 700 scientists and technicians, the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases would use Fort Detrick's facilities to study slow virus diseases, such as scrapie and Aleutian mink disease, which require the long term holding of a variety of animals. Fort Detrick would also provide suitable facilities for research on hazardous viruses such as the Lassa and Marburg viruses as well as those causing respiratory diseases. The National Cancer Institute would use Fort Detrick for the containment and large scale production of suspected viral tumour agents. A less obviously practicable proposal by the National Institute of Neurological Disease and Stroke is to convert the geneticists and tissue culture specialists now at Fort Detrick to work on genetic engineering, by which is intended the "curing of hereditary diseases by genetic transfer".

POLLUTION

Clean Air Code for New York

from our New York Correspondent

NEW YORK CITY'S Environmental Protection Administration last week announced a new air pollution control code that Jerome Kretchmer, the EPA administrator, called "the strongest air pollution guide of its kind in the country".

The code, which still has to be passed by the City Council, has been in the works since Mr Kretchmer and Robert N. Rickles, the commissioner of air resources, took office eight months ago. The report was expected over two months ago, and rumour had it that Consolidated Edison, the power company for New York City, was exerting pressure to limit the scope and severity of the code. Kretchmer and Rickles both denied this accusation, stating that Con Ed had neither been consulted nor knew the contents of the code until it was published.

The major problem in the past has been that of