

UNITED NATIONS

## Doom-Watcher

SUGGESTIONS that the United Nations should play a more vigorous part in dealing with natural disasters have now resulted in a resolution of the Economic and Social Council of the United Nations, adopted at the meeting in Geneva at the end of July, which spells out a few practical steps that might be taken. The resolution will be put forward at the next General Assembly in New York. Its chief proposal is the appointment of a man whose job would be the coordination of disaster relief, at least so far as the various organizations of the United Nations are concerned. The idea is that the disaster relief coordinator should have a small independent office at the United Nations, and that he should be equipped not merely to spend money contributed for disaster relief by governments and other organizations, but also to provide technical assistance and, where appropriate, research on the prevention or at least the prediction of natural disasters of various kinds.

Although the new proposal should go a long way to provide a more easily identifiable centre within the United Nations at which disaster relief could be organized, it falls short of the more ambitious suggestions which have been made in the past that the United Nations should, for example, be equipped with some of the materials which have been shown to be valuable in recent disasters—helicopters chief among them. Instead, the Economic and Social Council has suggested that potential donor governments should let the disaster relief coordinator know in advance what kinds of facilities and services they might be able to provide.

further twenty years, a spokesman for the Royal Society emphasized this week that the society's interests are chiefly in the scientific research which can be carried out on Aldabra and that after the period of time considered necessary for the completion of the research programme, the society would hand over the lease to a conservation body.

The principal aim of the research is to understand as completely as possible the structure and function of an elevated limestone island ecosystem. Much of the groundwork was carried out during the expedition to Aldabra which the Royal Society mounted in 1967 when

there was an imminent danger of extensive changes to the ecosystem. More than sixty scientists have visited the atoll since 1967 and many of these have been supported by the Natural Environment Research Council; the Royal Society, however, maintains its central planning and coordinating role in Aldabra research.

### ARCHAEOLOGY

## Looting for Museums

from our Archaeology Correspondent

IN the past few weeks, museums and collectors have been alarmed by the discovery of several clever fakes, but in the long run science and scholarship may be more seriously damaged by the increasing flow on to the art market of genuine antiquities derived from illicit excavations. In *American Antiquity* (36, iii; 1971), Robert Adams, Director of the Oriental Institute in Chicago, writes a strongly worded comment on this situation, stressing the increasing scale of looting and the irreparable loss to archaeology: "If we do nothing, we condone these growing outrages by our silence and jeopardize the international progress of our field".

Gun-running, indeed, is not as profitable these days as antiquity-running. It is true that in many nations of the world (although not yet in Britain), archaeological excavation is illegal unless authorized by the national antiquities service and archaeological finds are automatically the property of the state. Moreover in many Near Eastern countries, as well as in Central America, antiquities may only be exported under an export licence. Unfortunately, however, most of the pieces which now command so high a price in the art markets of the world—the Mexican sculptures, the Greek vases, the Iranian bronzes—have been illicitly excavated and illegally exported.

This is, of course, of serious concern, since the importance of such finds is not simply their intrinsic worth or even their beauty but the information which the circumstances of their discovery can yield about man's past. The archaeological interest of a hoard of gold coins in an earthenware pot, for instance, may be the opportunity it offers for dating the pot and hence of building up a ceramic chronology which in turn allows monuments and other finds to be dated: the gold itself may be secondary. All this and much more is lost in clandestine digging, where the associations are never reliably recorded and all the information obtainable by the use of scientific aids in archaeology goes unremarked.

It is widely and increasingly felt that much of the responsibility for the in-

creasing loss of archaeological knowledge through illicit digging must be borne by those museums and private collectors who pay vast sums for unprovenanced antiquities, with no questions asked. In many cases these august institutions are, in effect, knowingly receiving stolen goods illegally exported from their country of origin. Indeed it is not unknown for Classical statues and vases, found in Greece or Italy, to be deliberately smashed by the diggers so that the pieces may be more conveniently exported than would the complete object, and subsequently re-assembled for sale in Switzerland.

The problem has been discussed recently in the context of the "Boston Affair"—not the strangler but the Museum of Fine Arts. The museum, already under a cloud for smuggling into the United States a painting allegedly by Raphael, has also been attacked for obtaining an impressive hoard of prehistoric gold jewellery, obviously from the eastern Mediterranean. The treasure, bought by an anonymous benefactor, is itself regarded by some as at best a collection of un-associated finds put together by an astute dealer and, at worst, a bunch of fakes.

The acquisition rather unexpectedly produced a strong swell of protest in the archaeological world, reported in *Antiquity* (44, 88, 171 and 257; 1970) in editorials by Glyn Daniel. In a sense, the museum was only doing what many others have done. It is ironical, therefore, that the "Pennsylvania Declaration", a somewhat sanctimoniously worded document from the University of Pennsylvania Museum renouncing the intention of buying unprovenanced antiquity (*Antiquity*, 44, 171; 1970), should come from an institution which only recently bought a comparable treasure in very similar circumstances. Indeed, that hoard of gold jewellery from the east Mediterranean seems more probably genuine than the Boston hoard, and it was recently given authoritative publication in an admirable and scholarly article by Dr George Bass (*American Journal of Archaeology*, 74, 335; 1970). Despite its holier-than-thou attitude, the Philadelphia Museum is right. International legislation is needed and, above all, a real public awareness in the purchaser countries that to buy important unprovenanced antiquities is directly to support looting and the destruction of the past.

Every museum and many private collectors have this sort of skeleton in their cupboards—the Elgin Marbles and the Codex Sinaiticus are British examples. Yet the urgent problem is not so much one of restitution as of stopping the looting. That is why it is right to pillory the unhappy authorities of the Boston Museum.