

## Disarmament's month in New York

A RARE opportunity for disarmament to occupy the centre of the world stage comes up shortly with the convening of a special session of the United Nations General Assembly devoted to disarmament. From 23 May to 28 June New York will be host to a conference (originally proposed by Yugoslavia many years ago) on a subject which has almost universal popular support in theory but which has only very modest successes to its name in practice. And not only is it difficult to stimulate disarmament, it is almost equally difficult to agree even on how to talk about it. Yet there is optimism that this conference will have some beneficial and long-lasting effects.

The problem with disarmament talks is the enormous range of national viewpoints. There are nations which believe that the only real subject to talk about is general and complete disarmament. There are nations that want no obstacles to modernising their own arsenals. There are nuclear nations worried about some anti-nuclear resolution catching the conference's imagination. There are non-nuclear nations concerned at the possibility of nuclear attack. There are nations worried about the behaviour of their immediate neighbours. There are nations that would like to link disarmament with development. There are non-governmental organisations with their own particular axes to grind. And over all this hovers the general understanding that the conference must come to a consensus on major issues—disarmament matters that have to be voted on are most unlikely to carry much conviction. One could be forgiven for seeing all this as a recipe for a meaningless gathering leading to nothing of substance.

Certainly there is unlikely to be tangible progress towards specific treaties in New York. Negotiations in the pipeline on a comprehensive test ban, a strategic arms limitation agreement or a mutual force reduction are too delicate and complex to profit by exposure to a vast assembly of nations—or so it is argued. But arms control and disarmament is a slow-moving scene most of the time, so the more perceptive amongst those going to New York are more likely to be looking as far ahead as the year 1990 and asking whether it might be reasonable to place a few milestones on the road between now and then. For up to the present the emergence of such treaties as there have been has been a piecemeal affair, depending little on what the community of nations really needed at an particular time or on what should be a logical next step, but almost entirely on what a few nations were prepared to give. In short, disarmament has really had no long-term agenda. The hope then is that out of the New York meeting may spring

a common resolve to rectify this anomaly and devise a widely acceptable programme of action.

To get such a disarmament strategy on the road, however, will require more than just goodwill. There are three areas in particular where much hard work will be needed. The first is in research: investigations into the real extent of the trade in conventional arms; experimental studies of how disarmament might be linked to development; design and analysis of verification schemes for disarmament measures, and so on. For this the United Nations might be urged to set up its own disarmament agency in the same way that it has agencies for health, food and meteorology.

The second area needing attention is in the field of information. There are two facets to this—international information exchange on armaments matters, and the stimulation of public interest in disarmament. One of the most effective means of paving the way towards disarmament is for nations to provide more detailed information to each other on the extent of their military operations, research and development programmes and so on. Certainly the bilateral exchanges between the two superpowers of the past few years, exchanges which some years previously would have been regarded as high treason, have slowly helped to build confidence that neither side will misread the other's intentions—there is clearly scope for more of this. On the other hand greater public involvement in disarmament matters is also much to be desired. Many, but not all Western countries have done very little to invite those outside a small circle to think constructively on this subject; the United Kingdom has a poor record on this, but improvement may be on the way.

Thirdly, the United Nations machinery for disarmament needs careful re-appraisal. The Geneva-based Conference of the Committee on Disarmament, loosely coupled to the United Nations, has developed a reasonably good line in consensus politics, and is not as large (31 members) as to be subject to many of the problems of giant UN committees. On the other hand it is largely dominated by the superpowers who act as co-chairmen, and usually has to wait on superpower agreement before it can do anything profitable. In New York there are certain to be moves to cut down on this dominance, and to make the committee more closely responsive to UN wishes. As long as this does not mean a major expansion in numbers, the move is to be welcomed.

The next month in New York will get few headlines, and such agreements as may emerge may seem unspectacular in the extreme. But there is reason to believe that a step forward could well be taken. □