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Madrid, Helsinki and exchanges

The reopening of the Madrid conference on the Helsinki agreements will bring very little joy to those directly concerned and little benefit to the rest of us. The proceedings so far have been one long wrangle, a measure of the extent to which East-West relations have deteriorated even since 1973, when the Final Act was signed at Helsinki. The weeks ahead are to be given over to proposals for the further elaboration of the Helsinki agreements (see page 343). For the reasons that have made the conference so far an occasion for the restatement of well-known positions, the second period is likely to see only a rehearsal of familiar opinions, known to be unacceptable to one or other of the states involved. Not much has changed since the proceedings at Madrid began. Sakharov is still in Gor'kii, for example. The replacement of President Carter by President Reagan will matter in the long run, but for the time being is likely to diminish American interest in the proceedings. The best that can be hoped for now is that the remainder of this conference will pass off without too much further damage being done.

One of the potential casualties is that provision of the Helsinki accords under which the Madrid conference itself is being held. Like many other international agreements (the Helsinki Final Act is not a treaty in the formal sense), signatories are invited to meet every so often to consider how things are working out. By comparison with Madrid, the meeting in Belgrade three years ago was more or less constructive. It accomplished little, but it did at least agree that there should be another meeting. The time is approaching in the proceedings at Madrid when people will be asking themselves whether they can properly wish on their successors in office another bout of frustration like the present. It will be unfortunate if they decide too quickly that that question should be left for decision through the normal diplomatic channels. That would assure that nothing like Madrid will happen again. That would be a misfortune.

Among international agreements, the Helsinki accords are a peculiar species. They correspond not to formal contracts among sovereign states to behave in specified ways but, rather, to the kinds of letters of intent that are signed by commercial companies which are persuaded that they have the basis for a deal but which have agreed that they may back off in certain unspecified circumstances. The Helsinki accords thus lie somewhere in between the promises to abstain from alcohol subscribed to by

members of temperance movements throughout the world and the fine print on the back of air travel tickets which binds the airline which collects the money to convey the would-be traveller to his destination provided that it is able to do so. While the Helsinki agreements were being negotiated, scepticism about their potential value abounded. In many respects, they have not worked — people's freedom to move elsewhere, for example, is still constrained. On the other hand, the remarkable freedom of journalists to visit Poland in the past few turbulent months may owe something to Helsinki. And advance notification of military manoeuvres may have done something to calm anxiety in Central Europe in recent years. The vagueness of the agreements has also, as predicted, made scope for misunderstanding but also injustice — such as the repression of the Helsinki monitoring groups in the Soviet Union. But the accords exist and, like other international agreements, could be abandoned only by further souring East-West relations.

For the scientific community, what matters most is what the accords have to say about cooperation and exchanges of people. The first flurry of excitement after Helsinki has now been overtaken by events, the banishment of Sakharov to Gor'kii only one of the more obvious. To people in the West, it is intolerable but also mystifying that scientists should be treated like this. In the East, imprisonment, exile and repression are instruments of government entirely consistent with (and thus justifiable by) the old Tsarist feudal principles that a person belongs ultimately to the state. There is nothing in the Helsinki accords to ensure that the Soviet government will behave differently towards its citizens, but there are opportunities to demonstrate that, if it did, important benefits would accrue. This is why flat declarations such as that attributed to Dr Philip Handler during the first frustrating session at Madrid can serve very little purpose. What is needed, and what Western governments should be proposing in the weeks ahead, is a much more imaginative programme of scientific exchanges than those previously arranged. Case law (and common experience) suggests that busy people do not wish to visit unfamiliar places for months on end. Why not, then, shorter visits? And why should not the governments at Madrid commit themselves to the support of participation in run-of-the-mill scientific meetings that would bring in more people from Eastern Europe, not just the Soviet Union?

Naming names in British universities

The crunch is coming for British universities. Indeed, it may have come already. The British government's decision in December that a further £30 million should be taken from the budget of the University Grants Committee in the financial year beginning in April could easily precipitate the crisis that has been looming for the past decade. For although £30 million is a mere 3.5 per cent of the budget as a whole, it will be the first time in recent memory that the universities collectively have needed to operate at less than full capacity. After three decades in which student numbers have steadily increased, universities individually are unaccustomed to turning away students for whom there is space. Worse still, the university system is not equipped to decide within itself how the consequences of even a modest reduction of business should be shared. Must all universities decline by more or

less the same proportion? Or is the misery to be concentrated in a few places and, if so, which?

Inevitably, confusion abounds. The Secretary of State for Education and Science, Mr Mark Carlisle, said on 6 January that he saw no reason why the latest budget cut should prevent universities from keeping up student numbers. The University Grants Committee, on the other hand, has issued a dark warning to universities that if they seek to compensate for reduced income from central funds by recruiting more students from the United Kingdom, they may in later years be penalized (*Nature* 22 January). The sources of these contradictory views are easily identified. The marginal cost of extra students is small and many even be zero in some universities and for some courses, so that outside observers may jump to the conclusion that less does not