

Oil tanker hazards

Inaction at sea

Brussels

The recently published Liberian report on the *Amoco Cadiz* disaster draws attention to the belief widely held in shipping circles that 80 per cent of accidents at sea are due to human error. In March 1978 the tanker went aground off the coast of Brittany spilling 230,000 tonnes of oil. And now the captain is to get his licence back despite his failure to send out a distress signal at the earliest opportunity.



Amoco Cadiz — what happens next time?

The incident prompted the European Commission to spend two and a half years in preparing a set of proposals on how such accidents could be prevented and cleaned up in the future. The proposals were published last June, and despite pressures from the French government they run the risk of never being accepted.

The most controversial issue concerns a requirement that member states should identify sub-standard ships using their own ports and order deficiencies to be rectified. Now that Greece has joined the European Community, 30 per cent of the world's shipping falls under Community jurisdiction. A recent debate in the European Parliament on the idea that the port state should check the standards of shipping ended in uproar, with the Greek representatives defending themselves against accusations that most defective ships were Greek-owned.

Conventions on shipping safety have already been established by the Inter-governmental Maritime Consultative Organization (IMCO), but signatory countries have been slow to enforce them. The Commission's directive would make the IMCO conventions mandatory.

Dissatisfaction at the slow progress of both IMCO and European Commission proposals led France to hold a conference on shipping safety and pollution in

December last year. The Paris conference, which was attended by Spain, Portugal and Nordic countries as well as the European Community, set up a committee, which has been meeting in the Hague, with the declared aim of drawing up rules on the obligations of port states which would be acceptable to all European countries.

While these deliberations go on, the European Commission has made still more proposals, intended to stand more chance of being adopted quickly. One directive, already adopted, calls for all relevant data on tankers and their movements to be

stored on a computer. Another requires details of the contingency plans of all member states to be computerized, and the Commission wants to run training schemes and equipment testing programmes. Many such precautions are already in operation in the United States, causing operators with sub-standard ships to concentrate on European trade.

Whatever the various European Community bodies decide, nothing much is likely to happen for some time. The United Kingdom and Denmark still refuse to countenance giving the Community competence in this field.

In the meantime, France is still pressing for the £670 million estimated to be the cost of damages caused by the *Amoco Cadiz*.

Jasper Becker

US animal research

Stricter safeguards

Washington

Although the United States has so far avoided violent demonstrations against the use of animals in research such as those in Canada and the United Kingdom, public pressure for stricter safeguards is mounting. Three separate bills have been introduced in the new session of Congress. One, first introduced by Representative

Frederick Richmond in 1979, would permit the withdrawal of public funds from any research project in which laboratory animals were judged to be used unnecessarily.

The research community, and officials at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), are dismayed at the prospect of new regulations. At a meeting last month convened by NIH, scientists and animal welfare groups discussed the feasibility of the wider use of *in vitro* testing methods and mathematical modelling as alternatives to the use of live animals. Dr William Raub, associate director at NIH, said that he would approach the Office of Science and Technology Policy (if it survives under the new Administration) to suggest a regular forum for the discussion of alternatives to animals.

This proposal should at least satisfy Congressman George Brown, previously chairman of the House of Representatives Science and Research Committee, who came out in favour of more open discussion between scientists and their critics after a flood of correspondence supporting the Richmond bill. One of Mr Brown's objectives is to avoid trouble such as that in Canada, where radical anti-vivisectionists last year broke into National Research Council laboratories, setting free laboratory animals.

In the United States, protests against the widespread use of laboratory animals have taken the form of lobbying, led by groups such as United Action for Animals, based in New York.

One result so far stems from the campaign last year by more than 400 animal welfare groups against the Draize irritancy test for cosmetics, in which liquids are dropped on rabbits' eyes to test for inflammation. Revlon, one of the largest cosmetic manufacturers, was singled out for criticism and last November gave a \$750,000 grant to Rockefeller University to investigate cell culture alternatives.

The passage of new legislation will not, however, be straightforward. Present legislation goes back to the 1960s and is concerned with the care of laboratory animals, not with the tests to which they are subjected. The Scientists' Center for Animal Welfare is pressing for the wider adoption of a procedure already introduced by the Veterans Administration in which research proposals are vetted in advance to ensure that appropriate procedures are followed in the use of laboratory animals.

Mr Richmond's bill, the front runner in Congress, would establish a centre for the development of methods of research and testing not involving the use of live animals. Supporters of the bill say that such a centre could operate in much the same way as the National Toxicological Program, introduced three years ago, which coordinates research on toxic substances in the major federal agencies. The centre would have power to direct between

30 and 50 per cent of NIH funds for animal-based research into the development of alternative testing methods.

Critics, such as the National Society for Medical Research, argue that the bill would give federal regulators "potentially catastrophic" powers and that scientists use alternative methods voluntarily when they are available. Feelings on both sides run high, however. NIH officials, previously cool to the demands of the animal welfare groups, seem now to be hoping that if they can bend with the wind, legislation will be avoided.

David Dickson

UK animal research

Legislation unlikely

British legislation on laboratory animals is hanging fire until the draft of a Council of Europe convention is agreed, supposedly in May. The government has said that new legislation will not be based on the amended version of the private member's bill first introduced into the House of Lords by Lord Halsbury last session and reintroduced this session. Members of the Lords committee that sat to amend that Halsbury bill now fear that further delays, due to tardiness in the Council of Europe or in drafting a new bill, could jeopardize agreement reached by opposing sides during the committee's deliberations.

The government hopes to avoid passing legislation clashing with the convention's aims. British legislation, however, is bound to be more stringent than the lowest common denominator between the Council's member states laid down in the convention. The latest available draft contains nothing that contradicts the Halsbury bill or that is likely to give the government's bill drafters pause.

Whether further amendments will cause problems remains to be seen. But the government's objections to the Halsbury bill are clearly on other grounds. During the second reading debate before Christmas, Lord Belstead for the government said that the bill leaves too much to the discretion of the Home Secretary and invests too many powers in an advisory committee that would be set up to review regularly ethical matters and the replacement and use of laboratory animals.

Lord Halsbury is far from content. He suspects that the main objections to his bill have come from Home Office inspectors who fear that an advisory committee, along the lines laid down in the bill, would disrupt their well-trying methods of working. Despite government assurances that the original timetable still stands, Halsbury fears that delays in the Council of Europe could push it back. He plans to keep the issue alive by pushing his amended bill through the committee and report stages in the Lords in May even though it is now clear that it will never get a reading in the Commons.

Judy Redfearn

Commonwealth meeting

Food for reserves

Dacca

Moves to bolster the dangerously low level of world food stocks were the main outcome of a meeting of Commonwealth ministers for agricultural and rural development held in Dacca, Bangladesh, on 11-13 February. The ministers agreed that by mid-1981 negotiations should be completed to create a new International Grains Arrangement aimed at providing some of the 500,000 tons of cereals needed annually to replenish the International Emergency Food Reserve.

This was the first full-scale Commonwealth ministerial meeting of its kind, and was attended by 21 of the 44 member countries. The Commonwealth is made up of 20 nations showing a food deficit, and 21 with a surplus in food production. The remaining 3 nations, including host-nation Bangladesh, are on the verge of becoming self-sufficient.

The ministers urged quick action from international funding agencies, especially the World Bank and the International Fund for Agricultural Development, which are concentrating on aid to the poorest countries. Extra resources were called for to enable the Commonwealth Fund for Technical Cooperation to give more aid to developing Commonwealth countries.

M. Kabir

Romanian agriculture

Research expansion

President Nicolae Ceausescu of Romania called last month for greater research effort in agricultural sciences. He was addressing the 11,000 delegates at the Second Congress of Workers in Agriculture, including experts on agriculture as well as workers from cooperatives, collectives and the small residual private agricultural sector.

Although, according to Angelo Miculescu, the Minister of Agriculture, agricultural production went up by 26.4 per cent during the 1976-80 Five Year

Romanian workers — due for some changes

Plan, President Ceausescu had previously pointed out, at a working meeting on agriculture in January, that targets during the past five years had not been fulfilled, and that "resolute" measures would still be needed. Such measures, he has now told the congress, must include expansion of research on plant and animal genetics, soil quality and, for the economists, the logistics of a switch from the traditional farming structure of the countryside, to the development of agro-industrial complexes. The latter scheme, by which food-processing plants are located in the countryside, not only eliminates the need of transporting perishable foodstuffs to the cities for processing, but provides additional jobs to reduce the drift to the cities.

The new research priorities will be met from the present budget, apparently by switching funds from other sectors.

In all these changes, said President Ceausescu, the Academy of Agricultural Sciences in Bucharest must have an increased involvement both in planning and coordination. The Academy, and, indeed, the whole educational system, he continued, must train more agricultural specialists.

Higher education in the agricultural sciences, however, is not to be open to all. President Ceausescu says that only workers or former workers in agriculture may go to university to study agriculture. The practice by which a young city-dweller can go to an agricultural institute simply to qualify for a clerical job nominally connected with agriculture is to stop.

Similarly, agronomy centres where specialists are trained are to be reorganized. At present, future experts are trained at "picturesque" centres, whose sites are frequently chosen for reasons other than agricultural suitability. At one such centre near Bucharest, for example, experts are trained in handling tractors in hilly areas, although the centre itself is remarkably flat. The reason is simple, said the president. "Comrades from the Ministry of Agriculture" want the centre there, because it is a convenient place for them to go and make speeches.

Vera Rich

