Polish universities

A legacy of repression

THE period of martial law in Poland — as far as academic life is concerned — was “frequently repressive and always restrictive of universal self-governance”. Such is the summing-up of a 600-page report on human rights in Poland, commissioned by the five-man underground leadership of Solidarity and delivered last month to the heads of national delegations to the Madrid “Helsinki review” conference.

Schools and universities are among those sectors of Polish life singled out for detailed analysis in the report, not only because they are the targets of particularly intensive political “verification” but also because the declaration of martial law came at a time when the universities seemed set on a path of liberalization. This trend, the report claims (citing speeches from the February 1982 Central Committee Plenum), was anathema to the Party, which saw it as a “screen for anti-state indoctrination” and an “extraterritorial enclave of Western institutions of anti-communism”. (The new informal “rector’s conference” was particularly suspect.)

The attack on the universities, says the report, was threefold: from the Ministry of Science, Higher Education and Technology, the Party authorities and the security police.

The ministry was responsible for the removal of university rectors who had been democratically elected under the liberal procedures of 1980–81, the expulsion of student activists from the banned Independent Students’ Association (NZS), the implementation of the political “verification” process (often in the face of concerted passive resistance from academic and administrative staff) and the general disciplining of universities and departments which failed to toe the line. A whole range of sanctions was introduced including the threat of closure of individual departments or whole universities. By the beginning of the academic year 1982–83, twenty of the “democratic” rectors had been removed — including those of Warsaw, Poznan, Wrocław, Gdansk and Torun Universities, the Technical Universities of Krakow, Wrocław, Szczecin, Białystok and Częstochowa, the Higher Naval College of Gdansk and the “Maria Skłodowska-Curie” University of Lublin.

Security police measures included the quelling of demonstrations and also, said the report, gas-grenade attacks on campuses during demonstrations, arrest and interrogation of Solidarity and NZS activists, searches of university premises and the report claims, physical and psychological terrorization of suspects. The case of Dr Jan Hutny of the Wrocław Agricultural College, arrested literally during

the defence of his postdoctoral thesis, is cited as an example of the police policy of attempting to terrorize the academic community.

Many of the examples of repression quoted in the report (which includes some 400 pages of individual reports and testimony) have already been reported. What this report underlines, however, is the illegality of many such acts, notably the notorious Resolution 192 of the Council of State. This made it mandatory for the universities to expel students convicted of offences against martial law (thereby curtailing the competence of the rectors to dis-

cipline their own students) published only on 7 September 1982, it was made retroactive to cover the demonstrations of 31 August.

Many of the most stringent martial law measures — including the temporary return to the draconian 1958 law on the universities which transformed the university rectors virtually into auxiliary police — have been superseded by the new higher education act of May 1982. Other consequences of martial law — including the government ruling that soldiers completing their three-year term of duty can go to university without taking the entrance examination — could well, the compilers of the report fear, become a standard feature of Polish educational policy for years to come. **Vera Rich**

Windscale 1957 accident

Forgotten polonium is traced

IT was a difficult week for Mr H.J. Dunster, Director of the UK National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB). The board was forced to admit last week that by an oversight it had omitted to consider a potentially dangerous radioisotope that was released during the Windscale reactor fire in October 1957, in a report published by the board in February this year (see *Nature* 17 March, p.207). The embarrassment is increased by the fact that Mr Dunster contributed to a paper in 1958 that mentioned the isotope, polonium-210. Mr Dunster said last week that the omission “wasn’t too sensible”.

The fire burned for two days in a reactor used for producing materials for nuclear weapons. Polonium was being manufactured by irradiating bismuth, for use with beryllium as a trigger in fission bombs. The fire led to an uncontrolled release into the atmosphere of a gas cloud containing various radionuclides. At the time most of the attention focused on the hazards posed by iodine-131, a gamma emitter that can cause thyroid cancer. However, the board now estimates that about 150 curies of polonium-210 were also released — a fact that appears to have been overlooked by all of the official reports into the incident.

Lord Penney, who chaired the first government inquiry into the affair, said last week that although he had been aware that polonium was in the reactor, it had not been brought to his attention that any polonium was released. A report detailing the level of polonium activity recorded at the Atomic Energy Authority’s base at Harwell appeared in *Nature* in 1958 (182; p.627). Polonium activity in the atmosphere was also detected in Holland and the analysis confirmed at Harwell, where Mr Dunster was at the time health physics advisor for the Windscale plant.

NRPB will be making a full revision of its estimate of population dosage as a result of the fire, but the latest estimates from scientists at the board are that the

polonium would be equivalent to one or two weeks of natural background radiation. This would correspond to an increase of 50 to 100 per cent in the total expected number of “health effects” (cancer deaths plus hereditary effects) — from about 20 to between 30 and 40. This estimate depends on assumptions about the relation between dosage and mortality that are thought to be cautious, so these figures may be thought of as upper limits. Mr J. Moore, Under-secretary of State at the Department of Energy, said in the House of Commons last week that there was no evidence that any member of the public in the United Kingdom had contracted or died from cancer as a result of the fire, and that the inclusion of polonium in NRPB’s estimates did not alter this conclusion.

However, studies published by the Cumbria Area Health Authority do appear to show some increase in the number of registrations of myelomas in southwest Cumbria during the 1970s. Myelomas would not be expected as a result of iodine-131 contamination, but could arise from ingestion of polonium-210, an alpha emitter. Mr Dunster said that the figures — if confirmed — were “odd”, but that it was “inconceivable” that they could be a result of the fire in 1957. John Urquhart of Newcastle University in last week’s *New Scientist* published startling claims that up to 1,000 extra deaths could have been caused by the polonium, but his calculations have been dismissed by NRPB as being based on an out-dated model of polonium transport in the environment, resulting in estimates that are too high by about two orders of magnitude.

Urquhart’s model is based on a NRPB study that has since been revised, but he maintains that the revision is based on evidence relevant to only one of the possible polonium transport routes. NRPB is conducting its own epidemiological study and will be “paying close attention” to the incidence of myelomas. **Tim Beardsley**