

WHAT THE UNITED NATIONS IS DOING

by JENNY K. ROBERTSON, M.A.
Consultant, United Nations Association of
Southern Africa

WHAT DO WE KNOW about the United Nations? South Africans in general know very little about this world organization, apart from what they read in newspaper reports of the attacks made on our country's policies in the General Assembly. They have little knowledge or understanding of the vast programme of constructive work undertaken by the United Nations Organization in quest of world peace.

In the following pages, Mrs. Robertson gives an authoritative and detailed account of the present work of the organization and the human problems it is attempting to solve, not least of which is the problem of world-wide poverty and hunger commented upon by Mrs. Margaret Roberts in the preceding article.

THE three D's: Disarmament, Decolonization and Development, characterized the Eighteenth General Assembly of the United Nations in the closing months of 1963. Each of these carries out a main purpose of the Organization as set out in its Charter of 1945.

DISARMAMENT

The foremost aim, "to maintain international peace and security," in the effort to "save succeeding generations from the scourge of war," is seriously affected by the piling up of armaments, particularly nuclear weapons in the last decade. This has reached the sinister absurdity of "overkill", the nuclear capacity to kill more than once. One bomb on Hiroshima killed 100,000 people. It is estimated that, based on this "Hiroshima equivalent", the United States could "overkill" Russian cities 1,250 times, allowing for 50 per cent. failure to reach the target, and the Soviet Union could "overkill" American cities 145 times on a similar reckoning.¹

The possibility of such a cataclysm actually occurring was brought home to an awe-struck world when in the Cuban crisis the two nuclear giants of our time confronted one another. The display of power coupled with wise restraint in its use by President John F. Kennedy, and the corresponding willingness to come to terms on the part of Chairman Khrushchev, together with the offer of his good offices by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, brought the world back from the brink of nuclear war. Since then, even military experts being seemingly convinced

¹ 'H'-Bomb War and SANE WORLD, quoted in NEW WORLD, June, 1963.

that there is no "ultimate weapon" by which a nation can be protected, the opposite path of creating friendliness has been followed, resulting in the partial bomb-test ban of August 5, 1963, between the United States, the Soviet Union and the Kingdom, the establishment of permanent telecommunication between the U.S.A. and the U.S.S.R., and scientific co-operation between them in space research.

The nuclear test-ban treaty, prohibiting nuclear weapons tests in the atmosphere, under water and in outer space, has been signed by some one hundred nations, came into effect on October 10, 1963, and was formally registered with the United Nations on October 15. Discussion in the First Committee (Political and Security) of the General Assembly centred round a resolution asking the 18-Nation Disarmament Committee to continue "with a sense of urgency" negotiations to achieve the discontinuance of all test explosions of nuclear weapons, with reference to underground tests.

The benefits of disarmament

The benefits of disarmament have been set forth in a report of the Economic and Social Council of the U.N., endorsed by the General Assembly on December 18, 1962. The economists who drew it up came from ten countries with different types of economies and political systems, but they declared that the achievement of general and complete disarmament "would be an unqualified blessing to all mankind". Shortages in skilled manpower could be met by the release of trained persons from the production of armaments, the

need of the under-developed countries for training in agriculture and industry could be filled by the funds and trained personnel now used for weapons of war. The key to avoiding serious dislocation and depressions during any process of disarmament lies in advance planning and international co-operation.

As the 18-Nation Committee on Disarmament (France has not attended) meets after a five-month interval on 21st January, 1964 in Geneva, the international climate is thus more favourable for progress towards agreed measures of disarmament, particularly in the nuclear field. General disarmament is not likely to be attained while Mainland China is an unknown factor.

DECOLONIZATION

On June 30, 1936, His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia, appealed to the League of Nations for help against the Italian invaders. Speaking to the General Assembly of the United Nations on October 4, 1963, he recalled that vain appeal — "God and history will remember your judgment". Mr. Charles te Water, in 1936 representing South Africa, said, "Fifty nations, led by three of the most powerful nations in the world, are about to declare their powerlessness to protect the weakest in their midst".² Fascist Italy's attempt to conquer Ethiopia was the last bid in the colonization of Africa.

When the world emerged from the Second World War, the principle of "equal rights and self-determination of peoples" was placed second among the purposes of the United Nations. With other "human rights" this idea, "whose time has come", has caused a profound revolution which will take some time to settle down. The foundation membership of the United Nations, 51 in 1948, has now increased to 113, the increase being mainly due to the attainment of sovereignty by decolonized peoples. **The strength of the revulsion against the old régime is the explanation of the opposition to South African and Portuguese policies on the part of the Afro-Asian countries.**

They form, however, scarcely such a solid "bloc" as is often stated, for their vote in the United Nations is often divided — **except on this one issue.**

Human Rights

While the General Assembly was in session in 1963, the 15th Anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was celebrated throughout the world on the 10th December.

² "A Great Experiment" by Viscount Cecil, p.280.

Fifteen years before, the General Assembly, meeting in Paris, proclaimed the Declaration as a "standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations". Of the 58 nations then represented, 48 voted in favour and none against, while eight nations abstained and two were absent. The Declaration was thus adopted without a single dissenting vote.

Since then, two legal documents, a Covenant on civil and political rights, and a Covenant on economic, social and cultural rights, have been drawn up by the Commission on Human Rights, but are still being discussed, article by article, in the General Assembly. Several questions have been treated independently and form the subject of Conventions: genocide, slavery, forced labour; and, through the Commission on the Status of Women, Conventions have been held in the Political Rights of Women (now ratified by 39 states), on the Nationality of Married Women and on Consent to Marriage. Special safeguards and care for children are set forth in the Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959). In 1963 the emphasis was on racial discrimination, and on November 20, the General Assembly unanimously adopted a Declaration on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

This continuing action on various human rights emphasises the recognition that the withholding of any of them constitutes a cause of unrest and a hindrance to peace.

Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt

At a meeting to pay international tribute to the late Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, on October 21, 1963, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, U Thant, said, "Mrs. Roosevelt's patient and untiring work as Chairman of the Commission on Human Rights was a major factor in giving shape and substance to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. . . It was her personality and her tact which guided the immensely complicated work of drafting the Declaration in 1947 and 1948, and her energy and enthusiasm which sustained others in this great labour. . . . She could not only communicate with the oppressed and the exploited the world over, she could identify with them.

"She was one of those rare individuals whose courage, wisdom and goodwill — and indeed outright goodness — can light up a whole period of history and give comfort and hope to humanity even in times of the greatest anxiety and despair."³

³ United Nations Review, December, 1963.

(Continued overleaf)

Russian counterpart, and found that both had discovered the same facts about the atom in spite of great secrecy, this conference with its nearly 2,000 papers and some 1,800 delegates from 87 countries, afforded the opportunity for informal meetings between specialist delegates. In spite of technical details, the main concern was how to put an end to the humiliation of poverty, hunger and disease that is the lot of the majority of mankind. Eight volumes will give an account of the proceedings, the first of which, "World of Opportunity", a summary by Prof. Ritchie Calder, is now available.

EDUCATION

How to transmit technology to illiterate communities is the problem of the Decade of Development. Here UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, has to start with the volume of illiteracy. "An illiterate", said Mr. René Maheu, its Director-General, at the UNCSAT conference on Science and Technology, "is always a human being with his or her natural dignity and particular ability, and I have known illiterates who were highly intelligent, of sound judgment and even with a rich fund of real culture. But illiteracy, by closing the door to science and technology, prevents one's taking part in modern civilization".

There exist both adult illiteracy and child illiteracy. The campaign must be waged on these two fronts at the same time. First and most important, free and compulsory education must be established everywhere. Without that, the world will never cease to be burdened with new waves of illiterates; the illiterate adult population is at present increasing by 20 to 25 million annually. At the same time, however, there is a need for a large-scale adult literacy campaign, and this is being planned to make literate within ten years two-thirds of the 500 million adults currently assumed to exist in the member states of UNESCO in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Their own countries would supply 75 per cent. of the cost, but the rest is asked for, over ten years, from the rest of the world. It is women who form the majority of the illiterates, and their influence on the whole community is immense.

In accepting the post of Director-General of UNESCO, Mr. Maheu related how, though a teacher and from a family of teachers, he had passed his childhood with grandparents who were unable to read or write, yet he acquired from them his convictions: "above all else, the longing of the humble for learning, the people's quench-

less thirst for social justice. And so it was no surprise to me later to see the colonial peoples caught up in a world-wide ferment, which shook off the chains of the strongest and proudest rulers".⁵

TRADE

At present preparations are going on for a great conference, March 23 to June 15, 1964, in Geneva, on Trade and Development. The pattern of world trade has been mainly that the primary products of less-developed lands, often in the tropics, (food, fibres, fuels and minerals), earn foreign exchange with which to purchase the manufactured goods of the industrialized countries. A cause of hardship is that the price of primary commodities tends to fluctuate, with disastrous effects to the producer.

"Malaysia's second five-year plan, beginning in 1961, was based on the prospects of national rubber prices averaging 80 Malaysian cents per pound over the period 1961-1965. In less than two years prices fell below 70 cents, and the development programme had to be re-assessed." "In 1958 it took (Pakistan) an export of 25 bales of cotton to import a tractor, but today it takes 40 bales . . . what is worse it takes a still larger number if the import is arranged under a tied loan or aid."⁶

When these matters were discussed at the General Assembly in 1963, 75 developing countries drew up a declaration advocating among other things, "a new international division of labour, with new patterns of production and trade".

FINANCE

The low resources of the developing countries are being augmented by "aid" from several industrial nations, and also by the financial institutions of the United Nations, for example the World Bank, which will advance loans for viable projects of development, and the Special Fund, from which "pre-investment" schemes can be paid for, a survey of a country's resources, mineral or agricultural, or the training of technicians and craftsmen.

In his book about teaching on the United Nations, "Telling the U.N. Story", reviewed in "Unesco Features", Dr. L. S. Kenworthy writes, "The United Nations should be seen as the latest and most ambitious of man's attempts to break down the barriers separating people and nations and to create a peaceful and just international community". This is what the United Nations is doing.

⁵ UNESCO Chronicle, January, 1963.

⁶ Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization, November, 1963.