

international news

Two groups which have long been advocates of arms control and of detente between the United States and the Soviet Union last week condemned as "a counterproductive sham" the so-called test ban agreement which the besieged Mr Nixon brought back from Moscow. Suggesting that the agreement will do more harm than good in preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, the two groups—the Federation of American Scientists (FAS) and the Arms Control Association—called on Nixon to renegotiate a more meaningful arms control measure instead of sending the Moscow test ban treaty to the Senate for ratification.

A so-called "threshold" ban, the agreement would prohibit the United States and the Soviet Union from testing nuclear weapons with a yield greater than 150 kton. It is not due to be brought into effect until March 31, 1976. But it does not cover so-called "peaceful" nuclear explosions and it is simply a bilateral agreement between the Soviet Union and the United States, with no provision for other countries to become parties to it.

The FAS and the Arms Control Association believe that the treaty will do nothing to limit the number of tests conducted by both countries and that it will be seen as "a complete and cynical fraud" by countries which do not now possess nuclear weapons and which are looking to the nuclear powers to show some restraint in weapons development. In short, they argue that the Moscow agreement is worse than nothing.

They base their condemnation of the measure on four chief grounds.

- The 150 kton threshold—which is ten times greater than the bomb which devastated Hiroshima—is so ludicrously high that it will allow the United States and the Soviet Union to continue testing virtually unchecked. Furthermore, since it will not be introduced for nearly two years, both countries will probably carry out what the Arms Control Association calls an "orgy of intensive nuclear testing" in order to get some large tests in before the deadline.

- There are at least two, and possibly three, weapons systems which will have to be tested before the limitation comes into effect. First, a new warhead which is being developed for the Minuteman III, with a yield of about 400 kton, will have to be extensively

Test ban treaty condemned

by Colin Norman, Washington

tested. Second, a new bomb or perhaps an air-launched missile will have to be developed for the B-1 bomber. And finally it has been suggested that the missile for the new Trident submarine may have a yield of 200 kton; that too will have to be developed before the treaty takes effect.

- As for the Soviet Union, the chief programme which will be affected will be the development of MIRVs for the big SS-18 missile. Although according to some accounts testing for that device may already be completed.

- Aside from these weapons, there is little need for either country to conduct large tests—indeed, since the partial test ban was signed in 1963 the vast majority of tests have been below 150 kton—and so the FAS believes that the treaty will have little effect on weapons development. Thus seen from the viewpoint of non-nuclear countries, the agreement is a sham which does nothing to fulfil the commitment enshrined in both the partial test ban treaty and in the nuclear nonproliferation treaty to bring about a complete halt to weapons testing.

Equally counterproductive as far as stopping the spread of nuclear weapons is concerned is the fact that the agreement does not cover explosions for peaceful purposes. Since India justified its recent nuclear test as a perfectly peaceful enterprise—an interpretation which has been greeted with great scepticism outside India—FAS and the Arms Control Association believe that the Moscow agreement will increase the chances of other countries following India's example. As Adrian Fisher, former deputy director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, put it last week, the agreement "legitimises the Indian position" at the time when everybody is attacking it.

The FAS also points out that the test agreement may pose severe political problems because of difficulties in ensuring that it is not violated. For one thing the treaty provides for calibration shots to be carried out at each country's test site, but FAS notes that "we cannot know the yield of the Russian weapon from examination of seismological data

for reconnaissance. It could be 300 kton instead of the stated 150 kton". And for another, the same explosive force can give different seismological signals of differing strength, depending on where and how it is fired.

Finally, and perhaps most important, there is considerable concern that if this essentially meaningless agreement is ratified it will, in the words of the FAS, "sell out the efforts to reach a comprehensive ban" on nuclear testing by "retreating on policy grounds and taking the matter off the national agenda".

Thus FAS and the Arms Control Association are suggesting that the treaty should be renegotiated, with the objective of securing a complete embargo on nuclear tests. In any case, it is worth pointing out that some 37 senators, led by Edward Kennedy, sent a letter to Secretary of State Henry Kissinger during negotiations on the Moscow agreement asking that a comprehensive rather than a threshold agreement be negotiated. If they all stand firm in their belief that the Moscow agreement is meaningless in terms of control, they have enough votes to block its ratification if it is referred to the Senate.

If the matter is renegotiated, what grounds are there for believing that the Soviet Union would be prepared to negotiate a complete test ban? Two statements of Chairman Brezhnev are being widely quoted as giving a hopeful indication. First, on June 14 he said that the Soviet Union "was prepared to reach agreement now with the United States on the limitation of underground nuclear tests, proceeding to their full termination according to a coordinated timetable". And second he said in a speech on July 21 that "we would like to achieve something more and are prepared to go further; the Soviet Union is ready in particular to conclude an agreement on complete cessation of all underground tests of nuclear weapons".

It is widely assumed, however, that it was the Soviet negotiators who were most insistent in exempting peaceful nuclear explosions from the Moscow agreement, and that it could present a huge problem in any future negotiations. As the FAS succinctly put it, "the question arises of either talking the Soviet government out of its interest in peaceful uses or deriving an acceptable method of verification".