

Peace protests

Soviet missiles unwelcome

THE Czech human rights organization, Charter-77, two weeks ago formally repudiated views it alleged had been ascribed to it by the British-based "European Nuclear Disarmament" movement (END). Peace, said the Chartists, is not in itself a sufficient goal — it may mean little more than passivity in the face of tyranny. International peace, they said, can be guaranteed only if governments treat their own citizens with respect. Charter-77 is not a peace movement; there is a "long road" from "the absence of war" to "real peace".

The Chartists' statement seems an over-reaction to the current Warsaw Pact propaganda which puts the entire blame for the present nuclear confrontation on the United States. The Czechoslovak people as a whole seem reluctant to accept the official line. Party activists have reported difficulty in convincing factory meetings of the essential difference between "aggressive" United States missiles and their Soviet counterparts now being installed in Czechoslovakia to "defend peace".

Many have signed petitions against Soviet missiles, and students at the Charles University in Prague, aware that signing the petition would almost certainly result in expulsion, devised their own form of protest; a huge placard condemning the Soviet missiles was set up near the entrance to the university, with an invitation to all who agreed with the message to draw a little Sun on it. Within a couple of hours, the whole board was reportedly covered in Sun.

There is now evidence that concern about the Soviet missiles is widespread throughout the bloc. In East Germany, which is also to accommodate the Soviet missiles, there is a well-established "independent" peace movement. This accepts the concept of the bilateral withdrawal of missiles (and later of conventional arms), but is not acceptable to the authorities.

And in both Hungary and Bulgaria, the governments have denied widespread rumours that Soviet missiles may be arriving in the near future. The Bulgarians are particularly incensed, as they are committed to the campaign for a Balkan nuclear-free zone. In Romania (except when Soviet visitors are present), even official spokesmen take the line that they cannot apportion blame, albeit with hints that the West must make the first move. No "unofficial" opinions have so far been reported.

Poland has so far contributed little to the missile debate — save for the usual spate of "spontaneous" condemnations of the West. At least one group, however, has refused to sign such a document (see *Nature* 22 March, p.305). **Vera Rich**

Toxic chemicals

UK guidelines a compromise

BRITAIN'S Health and Safety Executive seems to have pleased nobody with its first attempt at British guidelines on occupational exposure to toxic substances, published last week under the unassuming title "Guidance Note EH 40". Some of the concentration limits specified are admitted by industry not to be achievable in the foreseeable future, while trade unions are complaining that the new document weakens their members' legal protection.

Until last week, Britain relied largely on the toxic chemical guidelines produced annually by the American Conference of Government Industrial Hygienists. These were used by factory inspectors to assess compliance with the statutory requirement on employers to ensure their employees' health, safety and welfare "so far as is reasonably practicable". But differences of practice between Britain and the United States, and the conflicting requirements of European Community directives, made home-grown guidelines desirable, and consultations were started in 1980.

The main change is that short-term exposure will in future be assessed over a 10-minute period, rather than (impossibly) instantaneously. This has pleased those who worry about the theory of occupational hygiene, even though, for substances with very rapid effects, the 10-minute principle will have to be ignored. But the numbers in the new list are copied wholesale from the US list it was intended to replace.

These "recommended limits" are "considered to represent good practice" and will be used by factory inspectors "as part of their criteria for assessing compliance". The Health and Safety Executive explains that there are not enough toxicity data on most substances to warrant "control limits", which have been drawn up for fewer than a dozen materials. Control limits for these materials have been set after prolonged haggling between employer and union representatives on the executive's Advisory Committee on Toxic Substances. Embarrassed by the shortness of the list of control limits, executive officials stress that EH 40 will be updated regularly.

Control limits, as distinct from recommended limits, are considered to be "reasonably practicable" and "should not normally be exceeded", according to the executive. But Mr Edward King, an ex-president of the Institute of Occupational Hygienists, says that the existing control limited for lead could not be achieved at any secondary lead smelting factory in Britain in the foreseeable future without unrealistic expense. The Chemical Industries Association reluctantly concedes that its members may have difficulty in reaching the supposedly enforceable control limit within 2 years. The limit for acrylonitrile may present similar

difficulties.

The Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs (ASTMS) condemns EH 40 for being out of date, based as it is on the US list for 1980, which has since been updated. Others think this is no bad thing. ASTMS also complains that it has not been given documentation of the new limits — although there does not seem to be any new scientific work underlying EH 40 and the union is represented on the committee that fixed the limits.

So what is the professional occupational hygienist's considered view of EH 40? Mr King has no hesitation in describing it as window-dressing that will do nothing to improve anyone's health. He believes that most damaging exposure to toxic industrial chemicals now occurs during cleaning and maintenance work, when normal codes of practice are often informally suspended in any case. Real improvements will have to wait until factory inspectors are more numerous or can impose more effective sanctions than at present. **Tim Beardsley**

Modest ecological disaster discussed

Washington

WHAT is fondly known as the "doom and gloom" lobby — the environment and world-future think-tanks that have been warning us for years about overpopulation, deforestation, acid rain, soil erosion and sundry depletions of non-renewable resources — met in Washington last week to say that things are not so bad after all. A conference organized by the World Resources Institute (a new "Center for Policy Research" in the Brookings Institution mould that is also known as the Council-on-Environmental-Quality-in-exile, thanks to the Reagan Administration's efforts to do away with that agency) entitled "The Global Possible" concluded that while the "doom and gloom" scenarios "could be valid", they were "confident that these trends can be reversed". How? By holding the world population to 8,000 million, arranging for a smooth transition to non-fossil fuels, controlling tropical deforestation, avoiding a disruption of global climate, increasing agricultural production, decreasing soil erosion, and, last but not least, strengthening public support for sound resource management.

Among the participants were Russell Train of the World Wildlife Fund, Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute, Martin Holdgate of the UK Departments of Environment and Transport and Mihajlo Mesarovic of Case Western Reserve University, a founding member of the Club of Rome. **Stephen Budiansky**