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PARLIAMENT: Move to ban war toys

When a publisher asked legendary Vietnam war photographer Nick Page to do a book that would "finally take the glamour out of war", Page, according to author Michael Herr, thought it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard. Taking the glamour out of war is like taking the glamour out of film stars. If war wasn't glamorous why would anyone be so fantastically stupid as to wish to kill large numbers of other people?

The reason may lie in the idea instilled in us from childhood. Although we are told that killing is wrong, at the same time we are taught to admire the heroism, the feats of human endurance and the feeling of being right and doing something about it that generally prevail in wartime.

On top of that there is the endless fascination of the gun, that extraordinary arbiter of human behaviour that has gripped men's hearts since its invention, providing the same frisson for imaginative small boys with toy replicas as for hardened war correspondents who "have never been so close to meeting their maker".

It is only in 1982 that a committee of a major international public body has finally got around to questioning the ludicrous and dangerous ideas about war and guns that we have been handing down to our children for generations. Calling for a total ban on the sale and manufacture of "war toys" in the European Community, the European Parliament's Committee on Youth, Culture, Education, Information and Sports has roundly condemned existing practices and attitudes and has called for massive reforms.

The report, which was compiled by French Liberal MEP Marie-Jane Pruvot, follows similar measures recently introduced in Sweden and calls for EEC support for firms switching from the production of "war toys" to the production of "peaceful toys". Comparable legislation is also under discussion in France and the Federal Republic of Germany, which is the largest European toy-producing country and where an estimated 83 percent of the population oppose the manufacture of war toys.

Political concern for the future of the toy industry in Europe centres on the fact that it currently provides jobs for more than 25,000 people in Germany and 17,500 people in France. The European Parliament's Economic and Monetary Committee has already rejected the conclusions of the Pruvot report, claiming that any ban on the manufacture or sale of war toys would be contrary to the letter, if not the spirit of the Treaty of Rome.

Similarly any national ban on the import or sale of war toys by a member state would be illegal under existing EEC law.

INTERNATIONAL: EEC aid to Lebanon

The European Community has provided £385,000 worth of emergency aid to help hundreds of thousands of civilian refugees made homeless by Israel's invasion of Lebanon. EEC ministers have also agreed to send 20,000 tonnes of cereals and have approved a £275 million European Investment Bank loan to the Lebanese government to help restructure the country's shattered economy.

The moves follow reports of massive human suffering among the civilian population and acute shortages of food, water, medical supplies and shelter.

The International Red Cross, which is channeling EEC aid, estimates that about 10,000 people may have died since the start of the Israeli invasion last month, with another 16,000 wounded and 300,000 made homeless. But United Nations relief agency and Lebanese government estimates claim that between 600,000 and 1.5 million have been forced to flee their homes.

The plight of civilian refugees may have been made worse by difficulties encountered by international aid agencies in distributing supplies. United Nations and Red Cross officials have repeatedly accused the Israeli military authorities of deliberately trying to hinder their work since the beginning of the invasion. Israel has denied the claims and accused the agencies of exaggerating refugee numbers.

International moves to stem Israel's advance have grown in recent weeks. EEC Foreign Ministers meeting in Bonn on June 9 joined the United Nations Security Council in condemning the invasion, describing it as a "flagrant violation of international law and the most basic humanitarian principles". They also decided to freeze a £27 million aid agreement due to be signed with Israel. European Community leaders meeting in Brussels on June 29 reiterated their condemnation of Israeli aggression, but dismissed calls for economic sanctions against Israel as unworkable. Their decision followed a recent European Parliament report questioning the effectiveness of sanctions.

They also called for an immediate and simultaneous withdrawal of Israeli and Palestinian forces from their present positions in and around Beirut and said that the current cease-fire in Lebanon "must be preserved at all costs". The European Parliament has also condemned the Israeli intervention, but combined its criticism with an outspoken attack on the activities of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. Coming close to equating the cause of Palestinian self-determination with terrorism, it called for the withdrawal of all "non-Lebanese" forces from Lebanon, in effect supporting Israeli demands. Socialist and Communist MEP's, however, disassociated themselves from the motion, calling for an Israeli withdrawal, an end to arms sales to Israel and a review of existing EEC-Israel cooperation agreements.

DEVELOPMENT: European Commission opposes grain stockpiles

The spectre of death by famine which continues to threaten Africa and other parts of the Third World has spurred a number of international experts and institutions to step up the fight against hunger in the world.

The question has dominated recent discussions by the European Commission, European Ministers for Development Policy, and the European Parliament, which, at its plenary session in June, issued a strongly-worded appeal for more coherent European Community action to eradicate hunger and malnutrition in the Third World.

Backed by European Development Ministers and the European Parliament, the Commission's ambitious long-term action plan to increase food production in Africa should soon be implemented in Mali, Kenya and Zambia (see Eurofocus no. 21/82). But the Commission has adopted a more reserved attitude towards recent proposals by a number of Sahel countries for the creation of national and regional grain reserves. The EEC's reluctance to give the green light to the programme does not hinge on the objectives of the plan - to increase food security in the Sahel - but rather on some of the methods suggested by the project. Commission experts fear that the creation of stocks based on imported cereals would increase the Sahel's dependence on external aid. As the European Commission sees it, the emphasis on food aid as a means of fighting hunger is misplaced. While useful, and indeed essential, in times of natural disasters, food aid can disrupt local agricultural production if it is institutionalised. As the aid tends to be concentrated in urban areas, it can also widen the gap between rural areas and cities in the Third World. The Sahel project also promises to be very costly. Commission experts estimate that about 104 million dollars would be needed for its construction and another 107 million dollars for the building up of cereal stocks. An additional 14 million dollars a year would be necessary to maintain stocks. This could overshoot the financial capacities of the countries concerned. Finally, the Commission stresses that the idea of regional reserves could be "premature". Action should first concentrate on improving the productivity of national agriculture and stocking and marketing policies. These questions will be studied in August of this year at a meeting attended by the Sahel countries and international aid donors.

SOCIAL: EEC helps immigrant workers

Millions of immigrant workers in the European Community face what are perhaps greater social problems than any other group in society. Working in foreign countries and often handicapped by a limited knowledge of the local language and laws, they frequently depend on voluntary organisations to help them with the bureaucratic complexities of arranging their work and residence permits and explaining their legal rights.

Non-governmental organisations offering help to immigrants are eligible for limited EEC aid from the European Commission's Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Education.

Commission officials emphasize that EEC aid is only aimed at part-financing projects, is not continuous and is not granted to any one organisation in consecutive years.

Applications for aid, with full details of income and expenditure as well as information on the specific project, should be addressed to: Directorate-General for Employment, Social Affairs and Education, DG/V/B/4, Rue de la Loi 200, B-1049 Brussels, Belgium.

TRADE: Soviet watches ban

The United Kingdom imported more than 1.8 million Russian wrist-watches in 1980. Last year the figure fell to a little over 400,000 because of a high level of stocks, but Britain continued to account for nearly all imports of Soviet-made watches into the European Community.

The problem is that the Soviet Union exports its watches at abnormally low "dumping" prices, which allow for little or no profit margin and which damage European producers, such as Timex, the only UK-based watch manufacturer.

Falling demand for watches since 1978 has hit Timex far harder than its competitor, Time Product, which imports cheap Russian watches.

The European Commission decided to adopt temporary anti-dumping legislation against Soviet-made watches in January. Now it has asked the Council of Ministers to impose a levy on imports equivalent to 12.6 percent to 26.4 percent of their value, according to the type of watch.

CAR INDUSTRY: Bumpers heading for collision?

What does a car bumper actually do? As its name indicates, its function is to cushion the shock of contact between your vehicle and the one belonging to the idiot who isn't watching where he's driving. But the effectiveness of the invention is reduced substantially if your bumper isn't at the same height as the one of the car you've just collided with. In order to reduce the damage done to your car, there should therefore be some similar standards governing the distance between the bumper and the ground. The European Parliament has just voted in favour of such a move and has asked the European Commission to study the means of "harmonising" bumper heights in the European Community. But this could be a request that is heading for collision with cost-conscious car manufacturers.

ECONOMY: Savings rise

After a poor year for savings in 1981, the first quarter of 1982 experienced a substantial increase in deposits in European Community savings institutions. Personal savings accounts witnessed a significant increase, amounting to about £371.2 million in the month of March alone. In the Federal Republic of Germany savings institutions registered the biggest rise in deposits. The total administered by EEC savings institutions currently amounts to about £201 billion, excluding commercial, banking and reserve deposits.

AGRICULTURE: Farmers face rising debts

The economic development of Europe's agricultural sector in recent years has brought a steadily rising indebtedness of farmers. The total debt of Danish farmers, who are by far the heaviest borrowers in the European Community, was about 253 percent of the value of their annual agricultural production in 1980. In other European Community member countries it varied between 25 and 86 percent. The European Commission says that the indebtedness of farmers has increased markedly in all Community member states in recent years. Annual growth rates of about 40 percent have been registered in Ireland and the United Kingdom. According to the Commission, this has been the result of increases in inflation and insufficient increases in farm prices, which have caused farmers to go more heavily into debt.

Why young workers should complete their training abroad

Emmanuel and Andre are twenty-two years old. The two young Frenchmen live in the Alps and in the Basque country, respectively. Emmanuel is an agricultural technician, Andre studied horticulture. They are just two of about a thousand young European workers selected by the European Commission to spend one year of their professional training in another European Community country.

Youth exchange programmes have become quite popular in the past few years, like the system of "au-pairs". But most of them tend to concentrate on students who want to improve a foreign language by living abroad. The European Commission's programme, on the other hand, focusses on young people who have already entered professional life. The programme covers all young European nationals, aged between 18 and 28, who have basic professional (not university) training or professional experience and who began working before they were twenty.

The candidates selected have the choice if either doing a short apprenticeship course (3 weeks to 3 months), or a longer one (4 to 16 months) in a Common Market country where they can complete their professional training as well as broadening their cultural, linguistic and social horizons. Longer courses are normally preceded by a language course.

The programmes allow apprentices to learn about the differences and similarities between EEC Member States as regards working habits and lifestyles and undoubtedly contribute to a more united Europe.

The first joint programme designed to facilitate exchanges of young workers was set up in May 1964. The programme remained experimental for a long period, and only covered about a hundred young people per year. Its expansion was hindered by the attitudes of trade unions and employers and the indifference shown by national governments. The Community's exchange programme entered its more active phase in 1979 when the second programme was launched, selecting thousand young workers. The EEC finances 85 percent of their living expenses and 75 percent of their travelling costs. The Commission ends up paying about £950 per apprentice and is hoping to increase numbers in the coming years. Financial problems meant that a plan to fund four thousand applicants was not adopted last year. The Commission intends to reduce its financial contribution per year so as to increase the number of participants. The decrease in the EEC contribution, it hopes, will be compensated by an increase in funds coming from other sources, such as employers or Member State governments.

The administration of the exchange programme is largely decentralised. The Commission, at the centre, sets up guidelines for the programme, fixes the financial side and selects applications. The recruitment of candidates and the practical organisation of the training periods are delegated to special promotion bodies sponsored by the Commission. These bodies are committed to respecting certain obligations regarding the nature, quality and organisation of the training. However, while some focus on training and professional experience, others emphasize cultural and social activities. Finally, a government representative is responsible for coordinating the exchange programme in each Member State.

The exchanges cover different professional areas: agriculture (32.6 percent of exchanges in 1981), tourism and hotel management (9.9 percent), manufacturing and processing industries (9 percent), banks (8.2 percent), import-export (5.8 percent), hospitals (5.7 percent) and administration and services. The evaluation meetings held at the end of the training period indicate that most participants are very satisfied.

Emmanuel is happy about his four month experience on a farm in Ireland. "My knowledge of English improved more in four months than it had in eight years at school", he said.

Andre was less fortunate. Workers at the German nursery where he did his training period resented his presence, feeling that a young German unemployed person could have done his job. But Andre was able to ask for a transfer and was much happier in a smaller firm where he felt he was part of the family. He learnt, as others before him have, that travel broadens the mind !

Further information about the exchange programme can be obtained from:

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