CIVIL DEFENCE

'All-hazard' approach to civil defence

By OUR POLITICAL STAFF

AN all-party initiative to increase the seriousness with which the Government and the country at large treats civil defence was launched at Westminster yesterday.

The National Council for Civil Defence is aiming to "depoliticise" civil defence, winning the involvement even of CND supporters, by making it a protection against all forms of disaster.

The meeting heard that Mr Giles Shaw, Minister of State, Home Office, had written to Lord Renton, the council's president, saying that the Government itself now accepted this "all-hazard" approach.

However it was stressed by Conservative and Liberal speaker and the Labour peer Lord Graham of Edmonton that more needed to be done if civil defence were to be taken seriously.

Momentum lost

Conservative MPs are privately disappointed that the momentum built up in 1980 when Mr Brittan, now Home Secretary, was put in charge of civil defence as a junior minister, has not been maintained.

A statement issued at yesterday's meeting by Mr Neil Thorne, Conservative MP for Ilford South, complained that new regulations issued in 1983 were "too precise, lacked teeth and have been largely ignored."

Particular concern was voiced that terrorist groups might resort to the use of nerve gas or even nuclear weapons, thus increasing by a horrific factor the amount of damage that the Frankfurt Airport blast, for example, might cause.

Operations to cope with the effects of violence of this kind, together with disasters such as Bhopal or Flixborough, had to be planned for, with the Government takfling the lead. Civil defence could no longer be seen only as a means of trying to cope with nuclear war.

Training programme

The National Council for Civil Defence called for:

Creation of a civil defence inspectorate to monitor compliance with the 1983 regulations;

Amendment of the Civil Defence Act to cover peacetime emergencies;

A planned programme for training civil defence volunteers;

Preparation of long-term shelter and evacuation plans;

Steps to protect the public against the effects of chemical or biological attack; and

Greater emphasis on mediacl planning for peacetime disasters with thousands of casualties.

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Sir,—You report (June 8) the issuing of new guidance on civil defence after a nuclear attack and refer to DHSS advice that health authorities should plan for a rapid dispersal of supplies and equipment. You rightly point out that much medical equipment would be impossibe to move because it is built in.

Government assumptions are that before nuclear attack a period of increasing international tension will be followed by "conventional" war which would last a "matter of weeks" and involve fighting in Europe and air attacks on military/logistical targets in the UK.

Modern so-called "conventional" warfare is vastly more destructive than previous conflict, and is specifically designed to inflict the maximum possible damage on hardware and personnel. War in Europe would rapidly produce massive numbers of military casualties with multiple injuries whose only hope of survival would be sophisticated medical treatment away from the battlefront.

Thus while NHS hospitals will be discharging most of their civilian patients during this period, the services will be wanting to use 60 per cent of available beds for military casualties which may include personnel from other Nato forces. A few military hospitals are likely to remain manned at this time, but in general reliance will be on NHS hospitals and staff.

Far from being dispersed, therefore, equipment and supplies—and staff—will need to be concentrated to provide the intensive care that the casualties resulting from this "conventional" war phase will require.

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