

A CONFRONTATION over civil defence between the Government and the 157 local authorities which have declared themselves nuclear-free zones seems certain after the latest Home Office circulars on how Britain should prepare for war.

Hundreds of pages of detailed instructions on how local councils should prepare to take over government functions immediately before and after nuclear attack are likely to be rejected by authorities who think that scientific evidence shows that such plans are pointless.

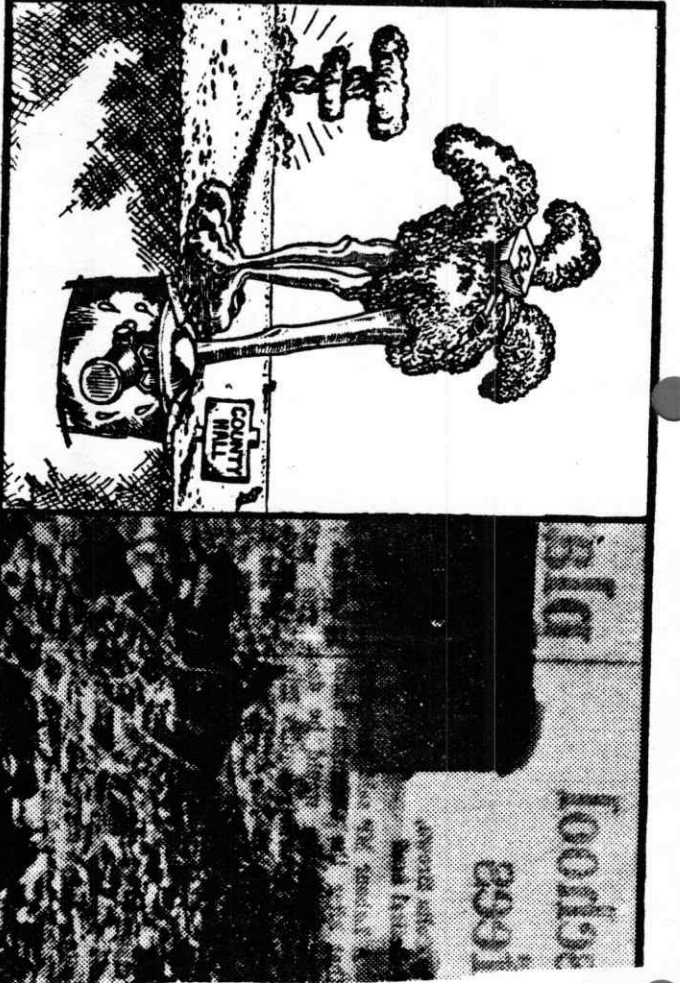
The Government does not help its case by saying that attempts to save lives should be made in the immediate aftermath of a nuclear attack even though the long-term chances of survival are debatable.

The weakness in the government case is that the circulars make no attempt to estimate the number of survivors that authorities will have to deal with. Perhaps more important, the longer-term effects of fall-out and the nuclear winter are not taken into account.

Recent and undisputed scientific predictions that large centres of population like London, the West Midlands and Manchester would be wiped out are apparently discounted by the circular. The same civil defence provision is made for London as for remote areas where some of the population has at least a chance of surviving an initial attack.

The Government says the risk of war in Europe is considered to be very low. The aim of government foreign and defence policy is to ensure that war does not occur and the circular asserts that defence has kept the peace in Europe for 35 years.

In a change from previous policy the circular stresses that civil defence plans are not just to protect the population against nuclear attack. They will also be activated to contribute towards "the social and economic welfare of the population in a time of tension and uncertainty



Present doubts, past realities: a cartoon from the CND's new civil defence publication, at

Civil defence circular will

which might precede war." Planning needed to take into account the likely minimum warning of attack, a conventional attack, possible use of chemical weapons, nuclear attack, and survival and recovery after nuclear attack.

The Government says that an attack on Britain would not be made out of the blue but would be preceded by a period of deteriorating international relations, possibly lasting for weeks or months. Civil defence plans should be capable of being implemented within a period of seven days and their most vital elements within 48 hours.

The circular makes it clear that civil defence forces would have an important role in keeping government services going in a run-up to war when there could be severe internal disruption

and shortage of supplies. The Government also sees conventional war preceding nuclear war but this would only last a matter of weeks, at most.

With Nato's current policy of going nuclear if the allies began to lose a conventional war, the circular comments that the more effective are civil and military resources the longer an escalation into nuclear war could be averted.

The Government's only estimate of casualties is that the loss of life in a nuclear attack would be very high. It claims that some areas of the country could escape physical damage although it could be in danger from fall-out.

"Despite the potentially devastating effects of nuclear attack, there could be many millions of people left alive.

Fuel Dissent

Their immediate problems would be immense and would increase if supplies ran out and living conditions and morale deteriorated. The circular goes on to say that effective civil defence could greatly increase their chances of survival.

"The world has no experience of such an instant and profound catastrophe," the circular says. It suggests that the fact that there is no long-term chance of survival is not an argument against trying to save lives in the immediate aftermath of a nuclear attack.

The Government, which is spending £70 million on civil defence this year, including £13.5 million on local authority civil defence grants is asking for comments on the draft circular by the end of September. The circular makes it the duty of local authorities to raise a volun-

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teer force for civil defence and set up local command centres to take over government if direction from Westminster or regional command centres cannot be continued.

Although by emphasising the possibility of chemical or conventional war at the beginning of the circular, the Government may hope to widen the argument over whether civil defence is necessary, it is clear from the circular that most of the money being spent is in preparation for a nuclear conflict.

One of the more controversial proposals is the raising of the local volunteers. As well as St John Ambulance and the Women's Royal Voluntary Service, the circular suggests Councils of Voluntary Service and Citizen's Advice Bureaus as sources of

volunteers. This brings such organisations into the political arena.

Another interesting development is that civil defence plans are getting closer to the Government contingency plans for regional planning in the case of civil disturbances. The same regional committees would take charge in both cases.

Despite the enormous volume of advice, the Government is stopping short of spending money on hardened shelters, making £30,000 the top grant available for preparing headquarters. These would house between 20 and 50 officials.

Local authorities are also asked to find suitable buildings to shelter people who live in flats and bungalows, who would be certain not to survive a nuclear attack. This is one of the measures

to persuade people to stay at home rather than try to escape to areas which have at least a chance of not suffering a direct hit.

By coincidence the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament has produced its own civil defence campaign guide, which is aimed at exposing weaknesses in the Government plans.

CND opposes civil defence because it gives the impression that most people will survive a nuclear war if they take a few basic precautions. It believes that if people are persuaded that they have a reasonable chance of survival they are more likely to become complacent about the nuclear arms race.

CND points out that the bulk of civil defence plans are concerned with preservation of political and military control of the home population before and during war and in civil unrest.

The Government is to bring out a new version of its much criticised Protect and Survive booklet, which shows how to build a bunker inside your home. In addition, the Home Office will publish a report on volunteers and a handbook on the role of environmental officers and doctors, and the Department of Health will bring out a circular on the role of the health service in a nuclear attack. The British Medical Association and the Royal College of Nursing, both already critical of the Government plans, will be asked to comment.

Many local authorities have so far done nothing about civil defence, and are waiting for the Government to threaten to send in a commissioner, a power it has under the 1948 Civil Defence Act.

So far there are no signs that the Government is prepared to do this. Instead, the circular hints are another tactic. It urges local authorities to prepare for local and regional exercises. In this way the Government can use the more compliant councils to try to show that civil defence is working.

CND CIVIL DEFENCE