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THE PALME COMMISSION ON
DISARMAMENT AND SECURITY:

A Critical Comment

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With the exception of the proposal for a 300 kms battlefield nuclear weapon free zone , starting with Central Europe and extending ultimately from the northern to the southern flanks of the alliances the Palme Commission report has passed remarkably unnoticed. There has been almost no debate. In the following I shall try to show why: it is not a good report; not up to the level one should demand from so knowledgeable people in our desperately critical situation.

I shall limit my remarks to the 44 concrete proposals in chapter 6, the general rhetoric of the report being of no particular interest - what is good in it is not new, and what is new is not particularly good. But the Commission has among its 17 members four present and former prime ministers and five present and former foreign ministers so these are not people, like us in the peace movement, often accused of lacking in political insight. In addition the Commission is three-cornered with West and East and South represented, meaning that they had to, no doubt often a very difficult task, negotiate; not merely function as a think tank. So, what did they come up with? A brief summary is needed.

Of the 44 proposals in the Action Programme, 36 deal with arms limitation and disarmament, divided into 20 short term measures for "the next two years" (presumably counting from spring 1982 when the report was made public) and 16 "medium term measures", to be achieved over the next five years. A very positive aspect of the action programme should be underlined here: the programme is a process, there is a calendar for the various parts of the arms limitation and disarmament complex. First the SALT II treaty has to be clarified and adjusted, then substantive reduction in strategic offensive forces; at the same time the anti-ballistic missile treaty of 1972 is to be "preserved" (meaning confirmed). For conventional forces in Central Europe a First Phase should be concluded this year, defining the problem, then to be followed up by agreements on ceilings and reduced levels. Talks on the battlefield nuclear weapons free zone are to start right away, resulting in the zone mentioned and in substantial reduction in general; mini-nukes and ERW (neutron bombs) to be ruled out by mutual agreement right away. Then there is to be agreement that the parties have rough parity in medium range nuclear capabilities so that NATO can forego the 572 missiles; after that come talks with a view to more reduction, including dually capable aircraft. To prevent short range nuclear systems from taking over by simply being forward based they are to be banned. So are chemical weapons in Europe,

and all over the world, ending with a disarmament treaty. The comprehensive nuclear test ban is to be agreed upon in the first phase; anti-satellite weapons are to disappear through agreements banning tests and deployment, and the non-proliferation treaty is to obtain "broader adherence" in the first phase and "universal adherence" in the medium term - together with an agreement on internationalization of the nuclear fuel cycle. A new conference on confidence and security building measures will be convened in the first phase and conclude with agreement on a second generation of such measures in the second phase. There will be talks and guidelines agreement for conventional arms transfer. Biological warfare and experiments in molecular biology with possible military applications have not escaped the attention of the Commission. Moreover, countries shall pay more attention to the UN resolution requesting them to report military expenditure; this is to increase from "broad compliance" in the first phase to "universal compliance" in the second phase. In the first phase there will also be regional conferences around the world focussing on economic security and reduction of military spending. At the same time countries will make national plans for how to convert savings when disarmament starts (and general and complete disarmament is the goal of this commission); in the second phase there will be conversion for national needs and development assistance. And to top it all: a "major campaign to increase public awareness of the dangers of military competition, including dangers for economic security".

Comments; critical comments:

First, the program shows an almost unbelievable faith in talks and agreements as the carriers of arms limitation and disarmament. Of the 36 proposals 19 are agreements, treaties, conventions to be arrived at, 2 are efforts to give more life to old approaches [ABM and Chemical Weapons Disarmament], 4 are aimed at obtaining broader (and then universal) adherence to existing agreements and 7 are proposals to open new talks - all together 32 or 89%. The remaining four are the national plans, the substantial savings and conversion of military RSD and the public awareness campaign - these are not put forward in negotiation/agreement language. A social democratic bias to believe that much in the negotiation approach?

Second, the structure of these negotiations/agreements is very conventional. Four of the 32 are between the super-powers, of the 24 that are clearly East-West conflict oriented. Of the remaining 8 there are 6 that deal with what might be called North-South problems - the other 2 are more general (reporting mili-

tary expenditures]. Perhaps this is a correct proportion, most serious problems rest with the Northern part of the world. But there is something paternalistic in those 6: how to limit down to Zero the access of the South to nuclear arms with no guarantee that the North will have nuclear disarmament, how to internationalize the fuel cycle. And the guidelines for conventional arms "transfer" will, of course, stimulate greatly Third world arms production since they are not linked to conventional disarmament in East and West either. Thus, the total package is not only conventional, it is also biased in the traditional way. Where are conferences of the non-aligned; of the neutral in Europe; all countries but with superpowers only as observers; of nongovernmental organizations? Has topheaviness proved effective in this field?

Third, the content is utterly conventional. It reads like so many Committee of Disarmament agendas from Geneva, with that one exception. From the list of consultants and papers one reason for this becomes clear: there has been absolutely no direct contact with the peace movement. Even such relatively conventional peace movement proposals as nuclear free zones (starting in the North and the South in Europe, then involving the central parts) and the nuclear freeze that was so well accepted by the US public in the recent votes, have not found their way into the list of proposals. Groups capable of mobilizing over 2 million people in demonstrations all over Europe fall of 1981 should not be a factor to be neglected by politicians who see themselves as democratically inclined. And the literature of the peace movement is full of ideas that are more forward looking, particularly in the field of alternative defense. The Commission makes no distinction between offensive and defensive forms of military systems at all (except for some passing references of no significance for their approach), but accepts the totally unrealistic "general and complete disarmament" as their goal. I think very many in the peace movement are considerably more realistic when they see a world with defensive systems as a goal, not these "commissioners" (their own term) who repeat an overused UN formula.

My conclusion can only be that if arms limitation and disarmament could be obtained this way we would have had it long time ago: of such negotiations and agreements we have had very many. Either they lead to nothing or to something so easily circumvented that the value should be doubted. Suffice it only to mention the partial test ban treaty of 1963 that permitted underground testing of the weapons we are now confronted with; the efforts to control biological warfare that left the laboratories untouched; the effort to control chemical warfare that are compatible with the binary gases because they only become deadly when combined, over the enemy (whe-

re else should they be deadly?]; the Tlatelolco treaty not ratified by the most important countries (and in addition heavily biased in favor of the US, the nuclear power in the same hemisphere). For any one of the proposals on the list there is no difficulty seeing how it can be circumvented. Thus, any 150 km zone on either side will greatly stimulate the production of "short" range systems with 200 km range; any nuclear limitation will encourage non-nuclear arms, including "modern" conventional arms (already tested in Lebanon); any nuclear test ban will encourage component testing and even more overproduction to compensate for increased uncertainty about the "quality" of the product; any universal non-proliferation treaty will greatly stimulate Third world nuclear autonomy and not only for civilian purposes; reporting of military expenditures will in times of economic crises be one more reason why military production has to become even more research-intensive (to save money per unit of destructive power); banning anti-satellite weapons will stimulate a race to colonize the moon as a platform or, if not, a rebirth of the now slightly outmoded and discredited profession of spying, on ground. And defense savings for development, the great carrot to get the third world to press for disarmament, is also rather problematic: the problems of the third world elites may be such as can be solved with money (eg more Western technology) but hardly the problem of the people; moreover, if that money were really made available in part it would come with so many strings attached from the major consumers of those funds today, the NATO/WTO power in general and US/SU in particular.

But this presupposes that agreements are arrived at. In addition they are not only bad, but ^{also} hard to arrive at. If balance really is to be pursued or maintained then it implies comparisons so complex that the talks become endless, or so obviously objectionable if a simple formula is used; as witnessed in the talks in Geneva about land-based, middle range systems - after one year and fifty evidently resultless sessions. But worse than that: the multilateralism and symmetry in the approach releases the parties from any obligation to do anything themselves, even the smallest little unilateral step (total unliateralism is hardly believed in by anybody, that is not the issue). They have "to wait for the outcome of the negotiations" - in the meantime they can continue increasing the level of destructive power which is what counts, not the level of military expenditure. Seen in that perspective the Palme Commission approach, not drafted by naive people, becomes almost sinister. They have some kind of process. The document is

logical as if written by a bright student for his thesis on "Current issues in arms limitation and disarmament". But it lacks the political starter, the thing that could set it in motion. And these people are professional politicians; they are the ones who should come up with it! If each of them had only had one proposal for his/her own country!!

But not even the idea of non first use pledges is included in the list of proposals - it had been around for a long time by the time they concluded their report (April 1982 - the Russians had talked about this for a long time before they made it a pledge June 1982; there was also the US "gang of four" and their Foreign Affairs article Spring 1982). Of course the Russians could cheat in a war, of course a pledge is a scrap of paper. But that is missing the point. NATO in general and the US in particular made the unforgivable of not taking up the challenge. They could have said: Yes, but only if you withdraw X% of your tanks, and give us a little time to develop further our conventional, non-offensive defense systems (short range anti-tank weapons). Nothing of this kind is included in the program. Was it too new? Were the Americans against, and was that good reason for not including it? In whose model did it not fit?

Leaving all the negotiations/agreements envisaged aside - is there anything else of interest? There is the campaign, a major one, to increase public awareness. This must be a joke, or maybe those politicians have not discovered that such a campaign is going on all the time, that this is what the peace movement to a large extent is about, and that public debates painfully clearly show, in all kinds of countries, how much better informed large segments of the public are than their leaders? And I might add: often the social democrats are the most poorly informed. The conservatives usually have so many military people and politicians who believe in the military machine that they also have knowledge. Social democrats all over Europe have tended to accept some kind of division of labor: leave that to the conservatives, on the condition that they let us build the welfare state and on the condition that the military systems do not cost so much that the welfare state and employment are in danger. If this can only be done by means of nuclear systems, so be it - and social democracy have tended not to question that assumption. Today, however, both welfare state and employment are threatened and social democrats are looking at the equation again. They will have much to learn from the peace movement information campaign, and fine if they will finance more of it. Unfortunately they are out of power most places.

Then there are the eight points to promote international security. Three of them have to do with UN Peace-keeping forces and are very old, but not for that reason bad. It is only strange that the commission did not come up with the obvious proposal of stationing many of these forces in that 300 kms belt they want - have soldiers from the South try to

keep East and West from getting at each other's throat. And as to the report by the Secretary General to the Security Council "at the Foreign Minister" level, his "state of the international community": this would have been more interesting if the Secretary General could only be elected for one period. If he has a re-election motive those reports would hardly be very good reading.

Proposal no. 38, that "the Security Council should meet from time to time outside the UN Headquarters" sounds interesting: that is where very creative demonstrations sometimes are held. But I am afraid something else is meant - and not something very important.

Finally there are some general words about regional conferences, zones of peace and nuclear weapon free zones with no maps and borders indicated. However, the report does not stop there. Right after this tame ending, obviously not worked through by the drafters, comes the only part really worth looking at but then not a proposal from the Commission as such: the Comment by Egon Bahr. He suggests the withdrawal of all nuclear weapons from European states which do not themselves possess nuclear weapons - leaving weapons in the four nuclear states, three of them in Europe. Then he wants approximate balance in the field of conventional forces and the alliances left untouched.

This is interesting and it is to be hoped that Bahr will continue along this line, particularly in his own country. The proposal has the virtue of simplicity. It can be understood. It does not ask for balance, assuming that at the present level of overkill there is enough balance already. It is coupled to balance in conventional forces (and here Bahr - in other contexts - emphasizes very much the significance of defensive weapons, that tanks can be balanced by anti-tank weapons rather than by other tanks). And this is real politics, as he says: "Even the intention of negotiating such an agreement would provide the world with new hope". It is, incidentally, not identical with the slogan of the peace movement, a nuclear weapon free Europe from Portugal to Poland, but lies in that direction. It can also be combined with the non first use pledge mentioned above as a first step, and with the ^{non-}nuclear pledge process advocated by Nobel Prize winner Alva Myrdal. It could even be started by West as a first step.

But the Palme Commission as such does not point in such directions. It is 99% a rehash of old, overused ideas, probably written by people themselves prisoners of a logic that threatens to kill us all - I am afraid they are prisoners of rather than liberators from the system. Maybe it merely deserves the oblivion into which it has sunk, and serve to remove some more illusions about some politicians.