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EDITORIAL

Sanctions on health in Cuba

Two weeks ago, the unexpected happened when Pope John Paul II and the Cuban leader Fidel Castro met at the Vatican. The audience marked Castro's agreement to a papal visit to Cuba that will allow the Pontiff unrestricted access to the people and will have wide media coverage. The prospect of such a visit adds a new dimension to the increasingly hostile argument between the USA and her traditional allies arising from the latest tightening of the US trade embargo of Cuba.

The US embargo has been in place for over 30 years, but during the 1990s the sanctions against trade with Cuba have become tighter and more wide reaching. The 1992 Cuban Democracy Act reimposed controls on the embargo that had been loosened in the 1970s. The reintroduction of third-country sanctions has prohibited subsidiaries of US companies in other countries from trading with Cuba. In addition, ships that have landed in Cuba are forbidden from docking in the USA for 6 months, which adds a further deterrent to the delivery of food and medicines.

The 1992 Act affected a country that was already struggling. A team from the American Association of Public Health went to Cuba on a fact-finding mission in the wake of the 1991-93 neuropathy epidemic. Their report noted "While the overall health of the Cuban population has not yet seriously eroded as a result of the economic decline, severe problems threaten to emerge in the future. Nutritional status could deteriorate if the food supply is not stabilized. Cuba could see a resurgence of infectious diseases as a result of possible vaccine shortages and the inability to properly maintain personal and community sanitation and a clean water supply. With insecticides in short supply, Havana is already seeing an increase in flies, mosquitoes and other disease-spreading vectors; these could become the source of disease outbreaks".

This year, however, has seen the harshest economic action yet taken by the USA against Cuba. Under domestic political pressure, President Clinton

reversed his initial opposition to a new piece of legislation—the Helms-Burton Act—and signed it into law in March. The law strengthens the existing embargo and allows US citizens whose property in Cuba was seized as a result of the 1959 revolution there to sue foreign companies who have invested in those properties. The law also requires that persons closely involved in these investments, including company executives and their families, be denied entry to the USA.

The Act has caused outrage around the world. Mexico and Canada have passed retaliatory laws that prohibit their citizens from adhering to the Helms-Burton legislation. The World Trade Organization has agreed to the European Union's demand for a ruling on whether the US law violates free-trade rules. And on Nov 12, the United Nations General Assembly voted to condemn the entire US embargo and demand that it be lifted.

What are the possible effects of these events on the health of the Cuban people? On p 1489 of this issue, Anthony Kirkpatrick attempts to answer this question by bringing together data that have hitherto been difficult to obtain. His findings indicate that the threat, real or imagined, of reprisals from the US Government is inhibiting potential suppliers of food and medicines to Cuba. His conclusion should have the approval of the Pope, who opened the World Food Conference in Rome earlier this month by condemning the use of embargoes that cause hunger and suffering to innocent people.

Some commentators have said that the target of US actions has never been the Cuban people, but the Castro regime. A year ago, in drawing attention to the health effects of sanctions on Iraq, we asked why the creation of a population enfeebled by disease should be thought conducive to unseating Saddam Hussein. The same comment might be made of Cuba.

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