

How the U.S. shortchanges world health

THE World Health Organization faces an unexpected but unpublicized financial crisis which is beginning to limit seriously its effectiveness and conceivably could damage it fatally.

The principal cause is the United States government.

For the first time in 38 years, the U.S. has failed to pay its share of the annual costs of the organization's expenses. Of \$61.7 million due Jan. 1, 1986, the U.S. has paid only \$10 million

Donald A. Henderson

— and this a full year later.

The State Department has agreed to pay another \$38 million in October, 1987, but has made no provision to pay the balance of its debt for 1986, and no money has been requested for the payment of the 1987 assessment which is now due. Other countries have taken note of this default and are themselves beginning to defer their payments.

Ironically, our government has not been critical of WHO and its operations. Rather, it has praised its programs, voted to approve its budgets and has rallied upon it for world leadership in implementing the Child Survival Program, in coordinating research on immunization and tropical diseases, in standardizing drugs and vaccines and a host of other activities, many of which are important to the health and well-being of our own citizens.

In March, 1986, I received from President Reagan himself the National Medal of Science for my work as the director of the WHO smallpox eradication program. That program, directed and coordinated by the World Health Organization, resulted in the global eradication of smallpox. A 1969 study by scientists at the Centers for Disease Control showed that the U.S. was spending more than \$150 million each year for vaccination and quarantine activities to protect the citizens of this country from smallpox. Those activities are no longer necessary and have been stopped. In current dollars the savings to the U.S. is more than \$300 million annually — five times its assessed contribution to WHO!

Today, we confront what promises to be the most serious global epidemic of recent centuries — AIDS. If ever a coordinated global effort in research and prevention were required, it is now. The best of sciences and public health from all countries must be brought to bear on a problem which threatens us all. There is no other international health organization which can do this. Does it make sense to cripple, perhaps destroy the one organization which can assume this role?

Responsibility for the failures to provide funds to WHO rests with both Congress and the administration. The omnibus spending bill (the continuing resolution) provided substantially less than the funds required for contributions to the United Nations agencies. WHO is one of these agencies.

The administration, for its part, has neither requested that the additional needed funds be provided nor has it set forth the implications of the reduced support. I doubt very much, in fact, that any in Congress fully appreciate the implications of their actions.

In my many contacts with international colleagues, I've learned that our long-recognized traditions of humanity and moral leadership are seriously suspect. Should we fail to meet obligations to WHO and other international organizations to which we are bound by treaty and whose budgets we ourselves have voted to approve, we face the charge of being morally bankrupt.

There is, therefore, an urgent need for the United States to act expeditiously to pay in full its obligations to the international organizations — beginning with the World Health Organization.

Donald A. Henderson is dean of the Johns Hopkins University School of Hy-



Health in danger

The World Health Organization was the principal agency involved in the global elimination of smallpox, an achievement that erased an ancient scourge and, incidentally, has saved the United States some \$300 million in smallpox prevention measures. Now the WHO must deal with a greater threat, AIDS, which may become the worst global epidemic since the Black Plague of the Middle Ages.

But the non-political, non-ideological WHO is facing a financial crisis that could destroy it. Why? Incredibly, because the United States won't pay what, under a treaty obligation, it owes to the organization. After 38 years of contributing its share, the U.S. is now a deadbeat. Of the \$61.7 million it owed in 1986 (a minuscule amount in a trillion-dollar budget) the Reagan administration paid \$10 million, and that a year late. It has agreed to pay another small part of its 1986 bill in October 1987, but has made no provisions for any more payments.

This bizarre U.S. behavior is discussed today on the Other Voices page by Dr. D.A. Henderson, dean of the Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health. He is uniquely qualified to understand a desperate situation. In 1986 Reagan personally awarded Henderson the National Medal of Science for his direction of the WHO smallpox eradication effort.

This now seems to have been another example of Reagan's preference for style (free) over substance (money). The WHO cannot function without funds. As Henderson points out, "If ever a coordinated effort in research and prevention were required, it is now. The best of science and public health from all countries must be brought to bear on a problem which threatens us all. . . Does it make sense to cripple, perhaps destroy, the one organization which can assume this role?"

He fears that the U.S. default of its clear obligation to WHO will make us appear "morally bankrupt" in the eyes of the rest of the world. But if morality doesn't move the administration, self-interest should, as the AIDS epidemic spreads relentlessly.

Let it be noted, incidentally, that the Soviet Union has paid its full share.