

## **A U.S. AGENDA FOR THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION**

The 166 members of the United Nations' World Health Organization (WHO) gather in Geneva on May 4 for a two-week meeting, the 40th session of the World Health Assembly (WHA). Once again the Assembly, which is the WHO's policy making body, has prepared a highly politicized, anti-Western agenda. As in the past, WHA members will welcome the Palestine Liberation Organization, promote disarmament concepts that affect the West and ignore the Soviet Union, and offer assistance to the "liberation struggle in southern Africa" in a way that supports pro-Moscow "national liberation movements." At the same time, WHA will ignore private sector initiatives to improve health delivery services in developing countries.

As they head for Geneva, the United States delegation once again should devise a strategy to stem the tide of politicization in the WHO. Such politicization, if unchecked, can taint and undermine WHO, as has happened with most other U.N. bodies. This would be tragic because so far the WHO has been one of the relatively useful U.N. agencies.

At Geneva, the U.S. delegates should:

- 1) **oppose proposals to regulate advertising and promotion of food products;**
- 2) **oppose further attempts to regulate advertising and promotion of pharmaceuticals;**
- 3) **insist on a stronger role for free enterprise approaches to health care;**
- 4) **submit documents outlining the flaws of WHO studies on nuclear war and disarmament;**
- 5) **vote against double standard resolutions aimed at undermining Western defense in the name of "health and development"; and**
- 6) **continue to oppose inflammatory anti-Israeli resolutions.**

Previous WHA sessions have endorsed the New International Economic Order (NIEO)--a 1974 U.N. blueprint for state intervention in the economy that opposes free enterprise approaches--and blamed Western developed nations for the problems of developing nations. The May 1986 WHA meeting, for example, adopted a resolution on "Repercussions of the World Economic Situation," which endorsed NIEO and appealed to industrial countries to increase their assistance to developing countries. WHA, however,

did not call upon the Soviet Union to increase its aid, even though the USSR contributes only 1 percent to the development activities of the U.N.

One item on the agenda of the May 1987 meeting is a review of the report of WHO Director-General Halfdan Mahler, which includes a section on "workers' health." Last year's Director-General report on this topic was severely flawed: only 30 countries participated in the study. Since most of them are outside the communist bloc, the result is a skewed picture of workers' problems. The U.S. thus should push for a WHO study of the state of workers' health under communist systems. If WHO refuses to approve such a study, the U.S. should underwrite it and then present it to the WHO for the record.

**Palestinian Issue.** The 1987 WHA meeting almost certainly will pass a resolution that has been virtually routine since 1976. It condemns Israel for its occupation of "Arab territories" and for "illegal exploitation of the natural wealth and resources of the Arab inhabitants." How these matters are health issues is a mystery. But the WHA will not condemn Vietnam for its occupation of Cambodia or the Soviet Union for its occupation of Afghanistan. When the anti-Israel resolution is raised, the U.S. should walk out.

**Disarmament.** Last year, the WHA committed WHO to the U.N.'s International Year of Peace. As such, this year a major agenda topic is "The Effects of Nuclear War on Health and Health Services." Among other things, it will endorse the widely discredited argument that a "nuclear winter" would follow a nuclear attack. It also will focus most of its attention on Western nuclear weapons developments without saying anything about the massive, dangerous build-up of the Soviet arsenal. It is very doubtful, moreover, that WHA will address the nuclear health problems posed by the catastrophe of the Soviet Union's Chernobyl reactor. The U.S. thus should propose that a WHO report study the effects of the Chernobyl accident.

**Regulation of Business.** On the one-time controversial issue of infant feeding, the U.S. delegation should do much more than practice reactive damage control. Instead, the U.S. should request that WHO study the experiences of developed and developing nations, in which industry self-regulation and voluntary agreements have been successful in matters pertaining to infant and young child health. The U.S. should oppose all attempts by WHO to introduce mandatory regulatory codes.

More generally, the U.S. should request a WHO review of existing private sector health initiatives. Among such initiatives are: 1) investment in health care industries including medical equipment and supplies; 2) privatization of specific health services within public health systems, including storage and delivery of pharmaceuticals, laboratories, x-ray and radiology services; 3) private financing of health services.

In Geneva, the World Health Organization faces a serious challenge. Its policy-making body, the World Health Assembly, has become increasingly politicized during the past decade. WHO has a choice: to rediscover its commitment to improve the world's health or to continue on its present course. Unless the WHO makes the right choice, the U.S. should start reconsidering its membership in this once distinguished agency.

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For further information:

"Economic Support for National Health in All Strategies," Background Document, 40th World Health Assembly, Geneva, May 1987.

Juliana Geran Pilon, "For the World Health Organization, The Moment of Truth," Heritage Foundation Background No. 507, April 30, 1986.