

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Soviets seek press censorship treaty

A plan to restrict reporting to "pro-peace" content is now a bargaining chip in U.S.-Soviet negotiations.

A report on the so-called London Information Forum, a four-week, 35-nation conference convened under the auspices of the Helsinki Accords this spring, revealed a sinister move by the Soviets to impose unprecedented government control over the media, almost worldwide.

The Soviet plan to create a "Pan-European Information Council" to lay down repressive "guidelines" for media practices, is now in the arena of negotiations between the U.S. and Soviets, and could be tacked onto any accord reached by the two superpowers, Dana Bullen of the World Press Freedom Committee told this reporter June 27.

Bullen reported on the London meeting at a forum on "The New East-West Communications Framework," sponsored by Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). He said that 69 proposals for "improving means of making news flows freer and easier" between nations were tabled at the London conference, and that most of them were welcomed as progressive steps which nations could simply apply as policy without treaties.

They involved issues such as expedited handling of visas, unhindered delivery and exchange of publications, easier licensing, and other more technical issues arising from the blinding speed with which advances in electronics are causing a communications revolution to occur.

But the Soviet proposal for an agreement on "universally accepted codes of conduct for journalists," monitored through a so-called "Pan-

European Information Council," threw cold water on the entire conference, and exposed the inherent dangers of encroaching on national sovereignty with supranational policies.

The Soviet plan would "establish a Pan-European Information Council to secure compliance with the universally accepted codes of conduct for journalists." It calls for foreign ministries of home countries to certify correspondents for visa issuance by receiving countries, to define limits for journalists' activities.

It proposes to create agencies to settle controversies about the work of journalists, to elaborate ethical norms for them, to promote legislation and other steps to "curb neo-Nazi or other kinds of extreme right-wing propaganda," to prohibit propagating war, racism, fascism, and to establish a "universal journalist card."

The Soviets also propose to "establish a research institute on problems of media," especially pertaining to the study of "enemy images," and to adopt rules to govern satellite broadcasting "with special regard to the rights and objectives of the transmitting and receiving countries," to restrict journalists to "legitimate pursuit of professional activities," to research "how media portray foreign countries and important events to be coordinated by the United Nations (specifically, its Unesco branch)."

The Soviets want to see the organization of symposia and other steps "to emphasize the professional and political responsibility of journalists and the media." They want "governments

to insure that in their territory news be objective and in no way interfere with relations among states." They want the media's role circumscribed to "creating a climate of trust, in safeguarding peace, in reporting on disarmament with a view to promoting these processes."

And, the Soviets want states to have the "right of reply or other comparable legal or administrative remedies relating to content or information or comment" in stories by journalists of other countries.

Such an unabashed and extensive elaboration of a proposed international media censorship agreement is more than just a look into the mind-set of the Soviets (even in this era of *glasnost*). It is a calculated move to lay the groundwork for serious negotiations within the Helsinki framework to achieve some, if not all, of these restrictions. As Dana Bullen told me, not only will these proposals be forwarded to the next full-scale Helsinki followup meeting in 1992, but there will be many other opportunities for the Soviets to push this program in the meantime, including meetings of Unesco in Poland or the International Labor Association in Geneva.

"The Soviets could simply go ahead and call their own conference with the objective of winning support for their plan, and they probably will," Bullen said. During the London conference, the Soviets called for the first meeting of the Pan European Information Council to be held in Moscow next year.

They said, "The proposed council would . . . facilitate the dissemination of fair and objective information, phase out confrontational approaches and enemy stereotypes, ensure observance of the universally accepted norms of journalists' ethics. . . . The first conference of the Council could be held in Moscow in 1990."