

A paper by the American geographer Gilbert F. White on technical problems in the Mekong River Basin, read before the American Philosophical Society,<sup>1</sup> and an article of quite different context, on the epidemiology of leprosy, by M. Gilbert, Secretary of the Ordre S. M. de Malte, which has been condensed for this issue of THE JOURNAL, started some musings by the editor which may not be too far afield to set forth here.

The tensions of southeast Asia have almost dominated the international news of recent months, marked, as they have been by political

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<sup>1</sup> Presented before the Society November 12, 1964; not published. See White, G. F., The Mekong River Plan, *Scientific American* **208** (1963) 49-60, and The Lower Mekong, a Proposal for a Peaceful and Honorable Resolution of the Conflict in South Vietnam. *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, December 1964.

struggle and increasing armed conflict. In the growing discouragement of hope for an early peaceful solution, it is refreshing to learn that certain scientific projects vital to the life of the countries concerned have proceeded, for a time at least, almost unimpeded by the political turmoil of the region. "The winding yellow streams of the lower Mekong River system in southeast Asia," to quote Professor White, "are currently the scene of a historic international experiment in river development." In this project, related to one of the world's greatest river systems, four nationalities immediately concerned, viz., Cambodia, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam, have cooperated, while experts from some 18 nations, several international welfare agencies, and the United Nations, have assisted in high degree in a great undertaking to utilize the abundant but now largely wasted water of the lower Mekong. "Given the political history of the region during this period," writes Professor White, "the continuation of the work"—which has gone on steadily—"seems incredible."

The editor feels that it would be inspiring for any reader to learn of the accomplishments of competent surveyors, engineers, hydrologists, agriculturists and other technical experts who have taken part. They have come from Australia, Canada, France, India, Iran, Israel, Japan, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Republic of China, the Scandinavian countries, the United Kingdom, the United States, West Germany, and other lands. They have included representatives of the United Nations, the World Health Organization, UNESCO, the International Atomic Energy Agency, the International Labor Organization, the Ford Foundation, and other bodies, in this altruistic project for the welfare of a region sorely in need of development, but economically and technically incapable of exploiting its own wealth of national resources.

Much of the work has in fact gone forward in the face of personal hazard from guerilla operations, and yet not infrequently with the actual assistance of combat units. The success of the operation in such difficult circumstances has led Professor White, a director of the American Friends Service Committee, and an imaginative planner, to propose a solution of truly heroic proportions for the huge political problem, through a substituting program of international cooperation for the technical development of this potentially rich region, a development that would ultimately benefit all the world.

Less stressed by Professor White, but always of importance in such undertakings, are the health problems of the regions concerned. The editor is reminded of an example familiar to Americans, for improvement in the education of certain population segments in southern regions of the United States, planned by the Rosenwald Fund some decades ago. The project was disrupted and delayed for years by the necessity of eradicating first an overriding serious handicap, hookworm and its attendant mental retardation, in the children to be educated.

Whatever is done for the economic development of southeast Asia

must take into account the health of the population of the region. In the reports of health departments, and in published papers of the area, frequent reference is made to tuberculosis, gastrointestinal disease, parasitic infestations, and many other acute and chronic infectious diseases. Not least among these is leprosy. Dr. Gilbert's associates, in the project cited in the first paragraph of this editorial, have referred to it as the number one health problem of Burma, which, incidentally adjoins the upper tributaries of the Mekong River system. The figures quoted by Dr. Gilbert, in part from studies by J. Lew of Seoul, indicate that the disease constitutes a problem of unusual magnitude in South Korea, another country where progressive public health practice and scientific research proceed in spite of the instabilities and difficulties inherent in an uneasy peace. The figures for South Vietnam are of special interest because they represent leprosy in two ethnically different groups. The leprosy problem is, apparently, a serious one.

One can only hope that what Professor White calls a peaceful and honorable resolution of the conflict will be reached at a time not far distant. In the meantime it is encouraging to know that dedicated health workers have remained at their tasks in truly trying circumstances, that enthusiasm still prevails for the tasks concerned, little related as they are to the current military exigencies of the region, and that in this effort to improve man's health the disease leprosy is receiving something at least approaching its due share of attention.

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