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Comment

SHOULD THE POLICE BE ARMED?

Two policemen who staged their own man-hunt emptied two magazines on a teenager who had just escaped from Bochuz penitentiary and killed him. This incident, which took place in August and which was reported in our last issue, was widely commented on and gave rise to strong criticism of the police. It also revived the debate on whether policemen should be armed.

One commentator noted that this tragic incident had led to the death of a young man whose only offence had been to commit a petty theft, and to try to escape from Bochuz penitentiary. That young man had nothing in common with the "mad dog" killers who recently escaped from a Colorado jail and were trapped a thousand miles away in Texas by an army of Rangers and armed police after having committed two murders and two rapes.

Guns should always be used with caution. Circumstances can arise where a policeman may lack the necessary reflexes, self-control or judgement to make proper use of his ordnance weapon. There are occasional incidents in Switzerland of accidental deaths due to police action. A well-known Yugoslav footballer was killed by an off-duty policeman in Sion two years ago as the result of a disturbance. On the other hand, it doesn't seem that the Police are better protected by carrying a gun. A policeman has just been killed in Zurich by a man caught breaking parking meters. He was shot inside a Panda car as the man was being driven to Headquarters.

Incidents of this kind in Britain never fail to trigger urgent calls for arming the police. The British "bobby" has an unequalled reputation, abroad as well as in the U.K. In no other country are men in police uniforms viewed with so much goodwill and affection. This is due in part to the British policemen's traditional courtesy and standards of behaviour. But it must also have something to do with the fact that they are unarmed and are thus covered by an aura of bravery and innocence.

The police in Switzerland aren't exactly loved at all, they are respected. The Swiss being a law-abiding and conformist people, have a remarkable respect for those powers that defend the law and decency. A gun must be the necessary appertunance of a man whose calling is to be respected. It is not so much an instrument of defence and of containing crime as an insignia, or an essential part of a cop's uniform. The problem of carrying a gun is also related to the differing attitudes in the two countries towards such weapons.

Guns are a common sight in Switzerland since every male Swiss has a most lethal weapon stored in a back-room for immediate use in case of war. This gun must be regularly produced at inspections, repetition courses and obligatory shooting exercises. Mothers, wives and children are therefore used to seeing their sons, menfolk and fathers go to the Army with an instrument that can kill at 400 yards. Pistols are also a common sight for the same reasons. There are thousands of officers in the Army who have been issued with such weapons.

As a nation of marksmen, the Swiss are therefore not too impressed by guns. Other countries marvel at the fact that ordinary citizens are entrusted with a gun at home and 24 cartridges in a sealed box to be opened in times of war. Should a Swiss want to use his gun for some criminal purpose, he could easily find cartridges at any shooting range on a Sunday morning. Surprisingly, the universal availability of an efficient weapon has hardly any incidence on the murder rate! To our knowledge some suicides are occasionally committed with the "Sturmgewehr", and some robberies have been committed with stolen guns of this type with sawn-off barrels.

Guns are of course not such a common sight in Britain. Laws on the possession of firearms appear to be stiffer here than in most other countries. But as far as arming the police is concerned, the relevant factors seem tied to the traditional and accepted image of law-enforcement officers. Although the rising crime-rate is bringing about pressures towards arming the police, many people in and out of the British police corps feel that this would kill the traditional bobby who has won so much

attachment.

Likewise, nobody except the dissident radicals seriously want the Swiss police to be disarmed since this would also modify the image of law-enforcement. A Zurich psychologist added that reactions of criminals towards the police depend on their knowing whether the latter are armed or not. A cat-thief in Britain is less likely to use a gun at pursuing officers but also more likely to get away since he won't be fired at. In Switzerland, shots are more likely to be fired with the occasional accident.

P.M.B.

SWISS EVENTS

FEDERAL

SWITZERLAND RECOGNISES THE INDEPENDENCE OF GUINEA-BISSAU

Switzerland has recognised Guinea-Bissau as an independent sovereign state. This Portuguese territory has not yet been technically liberated from Portuguese presence, and complete independence was planned for September. Switzerland is always careful in recognising new regimes or nations. In this case, Switzerland's recognition came after the great majority of member-countries of the United Nations had recognised the new State. These countries included the United States and the Common Market. Mr. Ernst Brugger, President of the Confederation, sent a congratulatory message to Mr. Luis Cabral, Head of the new African State which has waged war against the Portuguese for many years.

Gift of lorries to South Vietnam

The Swiss Government has offered ten first-aid vans worth a million francs as a gift to South Vietnam. The ten vehicles were presented by Mr. Gilbert de Dardel, Swiss Chargé d'Affaires in Saigon, to the South Vietnamese Minister of Health, Mr. Huynh Van Huon. They were to be immediately sent to the many refugee centres in the country. South Vietnam already had four vehicles of this kind supplied by the United States and West Germany nine years ago.

Switzerland short of energy

Switzerland's energy supplies are not guaranteed for the coming five years and the Swiss could be facing electricity shortages this winter. This warning was given by Mr. Willy Ritschard, Head of the Department of Transport and Communications in the German Weekly "Handels Zeitung". Mr. Ritschard added that the Federal Council was actually