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THE Swiss government has finally made its long-awaited formal recommendation that Switzerland apply for membership of the United Nations.

Backing from parliament is likely to prove little more than a formality. But approval from the nation is far from a foregone conclusion. Under the Swiss constitution the bid for UN membership must be put to a popular vote – and a recent public opinion poll has shown that only 33 per cent of the country's electorate are currently in favour of joining the world body. Thirty-seven per cent are against, and 30 per cent undecided.

The vote will not be held before the end of next year at the very earliest, and probably not until 1984, and the government is to launch a large-scale public information campaign before naming the actual date. But opponents here of Swiss membership of the UN have already announced a counter-campaign.

With customary caution the Swiss government has been studying possible UN membership since the world body was established 37 years ago. Ironically Switzerland has long been a member of all the major specialised agencies of the UN – such as the World Health Organisation and International Labour Organisation – and hosts most of them in Geneva.

The city also hosts the United Nations' European headquarters and was also the seat of the UN's predecessor, the League of Nations, of which Switzerland became a member following a narrow vote in favour in 1920.

Concern about voter reaction has prompted the government to go slow on the UN membership issue so far. Opponents claim that entry into the world body could cost Switzerland its famed neutrality and

drag the country into international disputes. The United Nations, it is argued, wastes time and money, functions merely as an ineffective talk-shop, and does little more than indulge in partisan polemics.

But an increasing number of official voices have recently warned that continued postponement of the application to join the UN could harm rather than enhance the Swiss cause. Supporters of entry argue that prolonged non-membership is diminishing Switzerland's influence in world affairs.

Membership of the UN can still be com-

patible with neutrality, they claim, citing the examples of such countries as Austria, Finland and Sweden. Austria's Kurt Waldheim, they point out, was even UN Secretary General for the past 10 years.

Swiss Foreign Minister and President-elect Pierre Aubert has warned that Switzerland can no longer remain an outsider, "a spectator on the sidelines." And even Mr Waldheim has declared his support for Swiss membership: "For years the Swiss have been contributing most constructively to the humanitarian, social and economic efforts and achievements of the UN. But they have an important political role to play as well."

In its message to parliament the Swiss government states that Switzerland's membership of the UN has become "an increasing necessity . . . and a means of demonstrating solidarity with other nations in seeking solutions to the problems which concern us all. The world will not understand if Switzerland continues to stand aside."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

THE Swiss government has ordered its diplomatic missions abroad to tighten security precautions, following renewed threats of violence by an Armenian guerilla organisation campaigning for the release of a convicted Armenian assassin.

The anti-Swiss threats follow the 15-year sentencing by a Geneva court in December of self-styled Armenian commando Mardiros Jamkodjian for his slaying of a Turkish consular employee in the city last summer. The three-day trial was held amid some of the tightest security precautions ever seen in Switzerland.

After the sentencing western news agencies in Beirut were telephoned by a caller claiming to speak for ASALA – the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Ar-



"Actually, it would be simpler if the United Nations joined Switzerland!"

– from the Berner Zeitung



menia. The caller warned that unless Jamkodjian was released, "we will attack without hesitation and consideration all Swiss government and civil institutions and all representatives of that government."

The Armenians blame the Turks for the massacre in 1915 of about 1.5 million Armenians. ASALA – which was formed in 1976 – has been campaigning for the independence of the former Armenia, now mostly part of eastern Turkey. There have been about 200 attacks against Turkish targets over the past few years. And last year's arrest of Jamkodjian in Geneva was followed by a series of bombings in Switzerland which killed one person and injured nearly 40. Swiss targets abroad were also attacked.

But Swiss authorities have repeatedly stated that they "will not yield to extortionist demands by terrorist organisations."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

BRITAIN'S Laker Airways has won permission to launch its first scheduled route to the European continent with a twice-a-day return service between London and Zurich.

After months of negotiation with the British and Swiss civil aviation authorities, the decision has been welcomed "with delight" by financially-hit Sir Freddie Laker who won a knighthood for pioneering cheaper air fares.

The Swiss authorities have now joined the British government in giving Laker the go-ahead for his service, which will offer passengers an advance-purchase return fare of £98. This slashes £14.50 off the cheapest existing tariff currently charged by Swissair and state-owned British Airways.

But under the deal these two airlines will also be offering the same new low fares as Laker from April – with British Airways and

Swissair having the added advantage of operating to and from Geneva and Basle as well.

Laker – who will fly to Zurich from London-Gatwick – has been re-negotiating a £200 million debt with bankers in a bid to save his independent airline. Founded in 1965, the company now employs some 2,500 personnel.

Sir Freddie first slashed fares on the trans-Atlantic route with his no-frills Skytrain service between London and New York in 1977, and later added scheduled services to Los Angeles and Miami. In 1980 his airline flew two million passengers before the recession began to hit Laker – and the rest of the airline industry.

But Sir Freddie has constantly expressed confidence in the future of his company. Only recently he told top travel journalists: "I don't think there is any doubt about us surviving. I've been in the business for 34 years – and I'm a survivor by nature. We have a battle a day with someone, but we have plans to operate more flights and more routes. And don't forget, the world has to be a better place because of Laker Airways. Because without Laker Airways there wouldn't be any low fares."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

THE Swiss Football Association says there is cause for concern about the financial state of professional soccer in the country.

Despite last year's successful run by the national team of four victories, three draws and only one defeat (the best year since the 1930s) and recent Swiss performances in the European club competitions, attendances at Swiss club games have continued to decline.

The reason? According to a team of marketing consultants called in by the Swiss FA, the drop in spectators has been caused

by over-saturation of soccer on TV, inadequate facilities in the stadiums, frequent lack of car-parking space, and – on the playing field itself – the often over-defensive tactics employed in modern-day football.

Another reason, complain Swiss FA officials, is that spectators these days can afford many other forms of pleasure and entertainment and return to the sport only to see the occasional big match. "What we're lacking these days is the regular fan," said one official.

Despite football's financial dilemma, however, soccer is still the activity among the 71 sports represented in the Swiss National Sports Federation which attracts the most players. Latest figures show that more than 8,000 teams are officially registered with a combined membership of 163,000 players – more than half of them in the schoolboy and youth categories.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

THOUSANDS of peace protesters have taken part in the biggest demonstration ever seen in Berne to support calls for world disarmament.

Police estimated the number of demonstrators at around 25,000 but the organisers said the figure was nearer 40,000. Although small by comparison with other recent rallies in London and other European capitals, the Berne protest was without precedent in Switzerland.

Called the "National Demonstration for Peace and Immediate Disarmament," the massive protest was organised by various peace groups, church bodies, and organisations promoting solidarity with the Third World. Supporters also included the Social Democratic Party, which is a partner in Switzerland's coalition government.

The banner-bearing marchers massed in Bundesplatz outside the Houses of Parliament, calling for the creation of a nuclear weapons-free zone in Europe from Poland to Portugal. But a statement issued simultaneously by the Association of Swiss Army Officers defended Swiss armed neutrality. The officers said they could not support pacifist slogans "which serve only to weaken the defence capability of our small neutral nation."

The Swiss football league programme resumes this month after the traditional winter break. Latest league tables were published in the January edition of the Swiss Observer.