

Global conference tackles urban spread

By Jenny Pearson



Vancouver, where the conference takes place, has a population around one million — which may reach two million by the year 2,000. It is the subject of a 'livable region programme', featured in the Canadian entry. See page 7.

Representatives of over 140 nations will be assembled in Vancouver between May 31 and June 11 to discuss one of the main issues affecting man's future on this planet: the development of human settlements to meet the needs of an exploding and changing world population. From this conference will emerge, through the media, statistics to alarm us and, it is to be hoped, some constructive plans towards solution of the problems which threaten us.

While the official United Nations Conference on Human Settlements is in progress, debating the major issues and adopting recommendations for action at national and international levels, a parallel conference will take place simultaneously across the bay from the heart of Vancouver, at Jericho Beach. Called "Habitat Forum", it is for interested organisations and individuals to express their ideas in a more free-wheeling way. The Forum is expected to attract between 10,000 and 20,000 delegates from all over the world, whose ideas and opinions will be fed into the official conference through television monitors, a daily newspaper and telejournal, and through delegate lobbying.

Habitat promises to be a historic milestone in the struggle to come to grips with the environmental problem before it is too late. Its emphasis is on finding positive solutions, where earlier United Nations conferences about environment have stopped short at

analysis of the problems. Participating nations are submitting in the form of audio-visual demonstrations various solutions they have found to the problems of contemporary living.

We mark Habitat with an outline of the situation that the conference is setting out to deal with on an international front, followed by an account of the 14 projects which Canada, as host nation, is displaying as novel and interesting ways of overcoming problems and pressures. Finally, an article about Canada's urban development dispels the lingering myth that Canadians live in wide open spaces: urban dwellers will soon outnumber country people nine to one.

The conference in Vancouver presents a cheering spectacle to set against the black pronouncements of the doomwatchers. Statistics of the world's population explosion are alarming enough, but here at last is a possibility of international co-operation, pooling resources and knowledge to do something about it.

At the heart of the matter is the arithmetic of exponential growth — most dramatically, in population and urban concentration, especially in the Third World. The figures are staggering. World population is expected to double in three decades, but urban populations are growing at twice that rate and the biggest cities are growing twice as fast again.

Examples of this urban explosion were cited by Jim MacNeill, commissioner general of the Canadian Habitat Secretariat, at a recent Rotary Club luncheon in Montreal. He said that on a recent visit to Manila he discovered that that city, which 30 years ago had a population of 750,000, now numbers over two million. Within the next two decades, its population is expected to reach 20 million. The same is true of Mexico City, Tokyo, Djakarta and many others. Third World cities with a population of over one million have leapt, in terms of proportional growth, from 24 in 1950 to 100 today, and will reach 300 in 20 years.

Mr. MacNeill said: "A massive, wholly unprecedented migration is going on from rural to urban areas of people, desperately poor, in search of the essentials of life and, most of all, of hope."

Basic strategies

The nations at Habitat will be considering a whole range of recommendations for national and international action to respond to these trends. What kind of settlement strategies are needed? What new kinds of planning? How can poor nations enable their people to provide the essentials of life for themselves in decent neighbourhoods within livable communities? How can rich