

EDITORIAL

BIRTH CONTROL IN TURKEY

The population policy of modern Turkey was strongly influenced by the first world war and events succeeding it. The world war, during which Turkey was forced to give up vast territories, was followed by the Turkish War of Independence (1919 - 1922), a long and devastating siege. When the modern Republic of Turkey was founded in 1923 the population had been reduced to an estimated 10 to 12 million and communicable diseases such as malaria, syphilis, tuberculosis and typhoid fever were taking a great toll of life. Despite its losses, the land area of the new Republic remained very great but the land was largely unutilized owing to lack of manpower. The army itself was weakened for the same reason. Against this background a rapid increase in population seemed essential to the survival of the new Republic and, accordingly, the new parliament passed very strict laws outlawing not only sterilization, abortion and the marketing or use of contraceptives but prohibiting also the dissemination of knowledge with regard to birth control and even the promotion of the idea of birth control.

What has been the result of this policy? The population of Turkey has increased almost three times in the last 40 years and the annual rate of increase today is some 30 per thousand, one of the highest rates in the world. The explanation of this dramatic increase can be found in the generally rising health level of the nation as a whole and most particularly in the control of malaria. Had the Turkish government realized, in the fifties, the dangers inherent in this health improvement and had it simultaneously introduced a program of population control to maintain a measure of equilibrium, the nation might not today be facing some of the social, medical and economic problems which it is in fact facing.

Let us first consider some of the economic problems which are caused by Turkey's «population explosion.» Turkey is a poor country. The total national income averages approximately 160 dollars per capita per day and the annual growth rate of the national income is 4-5 per cent. It is thus apparent that a more prosperous life for the nation cannot be achieved with the present rapid rate of population increase. It should be further added that, according to the

1960 census, 41.3 per cent of the existing population is 14 years of age or less, i.e. non - productive.

The medical and social problems are no less acute. Most families have too many children to be able to feed them adequately and the result is widespread malnutrition. The infant death rate in rural areas has been estimated at 165 per thousand and children under four years of age account for 80 per cent of all deaths in these regions. The underlying cause of most of these deaths is malnutrition. A social problem of growing magnitude is that of the *kim-sesiz* or unprotected children who have no one to care for them. This may yet prove to be one of the biggest problems facing the government in the near future.

As these problems gradually became apparent during the last decade a campaign was launched to achieve a change in the population policy. When the matter was discussed in parliament there was at first considerable opposition since many influential people were so deeply indoctrinated with the need for rapid increase that it was difficult to get them to accept the facts and to recognize that the situation had changed. However after four or five years of active campaigning on the part of birth control advocates the Turkish government has reversed itself and is about to launch a full - scale program of family planning and population control.

It may be asked what the chances are for a population control program in Turkey? Experts consider the chances good and point to the fact that even peasant families are aware of the danger and are asking for help. A survey carried out by the School of Public Health of Ankara University in rural areas indicates that the number of women dying from induced abortions may be as high as 9,000 per year. Accurate figures for the total number of induced abortions are extremely difficult to obtain since such operations are considered criminal. However the high rate of deaths resulting from abortion indicates that women are desperate to limit the size of their families and can, accordingly, be expected to cooperate willingly and successfully with family planning authorities.

Members of the new Turkish government are enthusiastic about the birth control program and it is expected that it will get under way as soon as preparations can be completed. The government has already approached the Population Council and it is hoped that collaboration with other international agencies will lead to technical assistance in setting up and carrying out the program.

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