

# 'Robber baron' warning in wake of war

PSYCHOLOGISTS paint a dark picture of a return to a near-feudal society, unless communities start now to consider ways of coping after a nuclear war in the Northern Hemisphere.

Auckland University's Dr Barry Kirkwood and Otago University's Dr John Henderson prepared separate papers for a symposium on the effects of nuclear war, held last weekend at the psychological society conference in Wellington.

They agree on many key issues.

Communications would pose immediate problems, they say, and if communications were severely disrupted, it could be difficult or impossible for central government to maintain control.

And if there was not some form of central control, we would be likely to see a return to neo-feudal social structures.

The emergence of "robber barons" was highlighted as a danger by both Dr Kirkwood and Dr Henderson.

## City states

If communications between different parts of the country did break down, clans or gangs would be likely to arise in each region, they say. Individuals would seize control of essential resources, and those who controlled the resources would control the regions.

Dr Kirkwood believes the sea traders and the major landholders would be the most likely candidates to take over as "robber barons".

Dr Henderson is the convener of the Psychological Society's working party studying nuclear impacts. He says communities should be made aware of the possible development of city-states, and should start preparing and practising emergency plans.

He has suggested that neighbourhood support systems could be linked to the civil defence structure, to protect local citizens and speed the eventual re-establishment of a central organisation.

"Control of resources will give power, and those in control will have to make decisions about who gets the resources and who doesn't," he said. "These will often be life and death decisions."

He and Dr Kirkwood agree that the defence forces should be planning carefully now, to take on the complex role of civil defence after a nuclear war in the Northern Hemisphere. That planning should include exercises with local neighbourhood and community groups, they say.

Both psychologists highlight the immediate problems that would arise in the health area, because of the reliance

of our hospital system on high technology and overseas pharmaceuticals.

Ten per cent of the population would die fairly quickly, they say, because there would be no drugs for people suffering from haemophilia, diabetes, asthma and other diseases.

There would also be a big increase in deaths of old and young, because these groups are particularly susceptible to disease. Life expectancy, Dr Henderson believes, could well drop to 35-40.

Psychologists attending the symposium urged strongly that people start investigating alternative forms of medicine that could be used instead of our "incredibly vulnerable" hospital system.

And Dr Henderson believes the debate should start now on some of the hard decisions that would have to be taken fairly rapidly after a nuclear war in the Northern Hemisphere.

"Although it will cause very heated discussion, it might be advisable to encourage public debate of such fraught issues as 'What to do about the boat people?' 'What to do about the diabetics, asthmatics, haemophiliacs and so on?'" he said.

## Vandalism

What to do about the cities is another issue. Both Dr Henderson and Dr Kirkwood say it is clear many city-dwellers would have to be moved out to rural areas, because of problems with food and water supply, and with sanitation.

That "de-urbanisation" would bring its own problems, they say. On the one hand, extra people would be needed in rural areas because farming would have to become less mechanised and more labour-intensive.

But city-dwellers, Dr Henderson says, are used to high levels of arousal associated with their urban living. Relocating them to country areas could be counter-productive. Lacking the variety of entertainments and stimuli of city living, there is a strong likelihood, he believes, that they would react by turning to vandalism and delinquency.

Psychologists at the symposium said all these potential problems should be seriously discussed now. Neighbourhoods and communities should be getting together to sort out what they would do, and what skills members of their communities possessed, so they would be prepared if a nuclear disaster hit the Northern Hemisphere.

The Maori culture had much to offer, they said. That had been clearly shown after the Bay of Plenty earthquake, when the region's maraes took on a leading support role as soon as the quakes hit.