

# Divided World Health Organization Braces for Leadership Change

By PAUL LEWIS

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GENEVA, April 23 — The World Health Organization is beset by unusual political conflict and anxiety as it prepares for a traumatic change in leadership.

Dr. Halfdan Mahler, a Danish physician who has led the agency for 15 years and who has earned high praise for his achievements, is stepping down as Director General in July. Next week, the World Health Assembly, the policy-making arm of the World Health Organization, is expected to confirm the nomination of Dr. Hiroshi Nakajima, a Japanese physician, as Dr. Mahler's successor.

Dr. Nakajima was selected for the post after a bitter political campaign that shocked many officials and doctors who work for the health organization, which is known for being skillful and nonpolitical. The organization is the branch of the United Nations charged with promoting health, medical research and disease control.

## Close Vote on New Director

Dr. Nakajima, a 60-year-old physician who has been the health organization's regional director for the Western Pacific since 1979, was selected in January by the agency's 31-nation Executive Board in a 17 to 14 vote that reflected deep divisions among member countries. Diplomats expect the choice to be ratified when health ministers from the World Health Organization's 166 member countries meet here on Monday.

In January, the United States and most other Western countries voted for a different candidate, Dr. Carlyle Guerra de Macedo, a Brazilian who is the director of the Pan-American Health Organization in Washington. In private, some diplomats and health organization officials have criticized Dr. Nakajima's management skills.

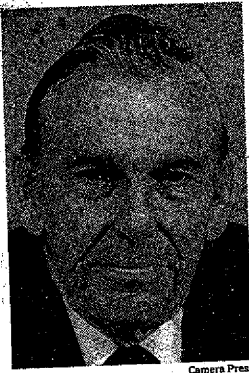
Dr. Mahler's retirement is seen as a major turning point in the history of the health agency. Under his leadership, the agency emerged as one of the most successful in the United Nations, and even those who criticize Dr. Nakajima agreed that it would be hard for anyone to replace the well-regarded Dane.

"Mahler's departure is an event in medical history," said Sir John Reid, Britain's recently retired Chief Medical Officer for Scotland and a former chairman of the health organization's Executive Board. "He represented a whole era" at the agency, Sir John said.

## Political Squabbling Feared

The divisive campaign to find a successor has led some senior health organization officials and other medical specialists to worry that the agency's operations might become mired in politics of the sort that has plagued other United Nations agencies. The battle followed highly politicized campaigns last year for the top posts at the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization in Paris and at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization in Rome.

Dr. Mahler, 62, raised the first alarm himself at the World Health Assembly last year as jostling for his replacement began. "Senior staff have become the pawns of power politics," he told



Camera Press

Dr. Halfdan Mahler, a Danish physician who has led the World Health Organization for 15 years.

health ministers, adding scathingly that "heads of state who have taken little interest in health or in W.H.O. in the past" are now "trying to mobilize other heads of state individually or in groups to support their candidate for the most senior staff position."

Although the members of the health agency's Executive Board are supposed to be independent and to keep their deliberations secret, health agency officials said Japan pressed third-world governments to support Dr. Nakajima, in some cases offering foreign aid projects as inducements.

Governments regularly campaign to influence the selection of top United Nations officials, using whatever diplomatic muscle they have. In the view of many diplomats, Japan, as the second-largest contributor to the United Nations after the United States, is entitled to a top post for one of its officials.

## Some Alarm Is Reported

Nevertheless, Japan's strong campaign on behalf of Dr. Nakajima has alarmed many senior agency officials and has worried some governments. Dr. Mahler and Dr. Nakajima declined to talk to reporters until next week's World Health Assembly meeting.

Dr. Nakajima joined the World Health Organization in 1974, working to improve medical supplies in the Third World. The nations of the Western Pacific elected him regional director for that region in 1979 and he has served two terms. He earned his medical degree and a doctorate at Tokyo Medical College and did medical and pharmaceutical research in France from 1956 to 1967. He returned to Japan as research director of Nippon Roche, the Japanese subsidiary of Hoffmann-La Roche, the Swiss pharmaceutical company.

The only candidates to replace Dr. Mahler besides Dr. Nakajima and Dr. Guerra de Macedo were Dr. Gottlieb L. Monekosso of Cameroon, the health organization's regional director for Africa, and Dr. Hussein A. Gezairy of Saudi Arabia, the agency's regional director for the Middle East.

The United States and most Western members of the agency's Executive Board felt that none of the candidates, including Dr. Nakajima, was qualified for the job, according to a senior State Department official.

In the end, the United States and other industrialized countries, except for France and Japan, supported Dr. Guerra de Macedo. But Dr. Nakajima won on the third ballot by 17 votes to 14.

## 'There Was a Muddle'

Some health organization officials and diplomats here say Western governments failed to make a serious effort to find an alternative candidate because they hoped that the Executive Board would draft Dr. Mahler for a fourth term. Dr. Mahler had offered in private to stay on for a few years, according to officials close to him, but they say that the Western governments did not respond.

"There was a muddle," a Western diplomat said. "Mahler did not make his position clear, so governments never focused properly on the succession issue."

While several health organization officials said privately that Dr. Nakajima was not a popular choice with the staff, not all top agency officials were worried. Dr. Nakajima did a good job as regional director in Manila, said Robert L. Munteanu, the health organization's director of personnel and general services, who is also retiring this year. Dr. Nakajima has a knack "for picking good people," Mr. Munteanu said.

## Staying the Course

Dr. Sumedha Khanna, who monitors the health organization's promotion of basic health care, said that despite a change in leadership, the organization should not be expected to change its direction significantly. "The third world and the industrialized countries like what we are doing," she said. "Our general approach is politically irreversible."

During Dr. Mahler's three five-year

terms as Director General, the health organization oversaw the eradication of smallpox. It raised the rate of child inoculation from 5 percent of the world's children to 50 percent, and it recently began to coordinate global programs against acquired immune deficiency syndrome.

In an effort that many medical specialists see as vital to improving health among the world's poor, the agency has persuaded developing countries that the best way to reduce illness is by placing more emphasis on primary health care than on advanced technologies.

Much of the criticism directed at Dr. Nakajima from within the World Health Organization comes when he is unfavorably compared to Dr. Mahler, who was unanimously supported in all three of his terms in office.

## Management Style Questioned

Officials familiar with Dr. Nakajima's performance in Manila said the Japanese official's management style tended toward the autocratic, in contrast to the patient and consensus-building approach favored by Dr. Mahler.

Some of the apprehensions may simply reflect the trauma of change. "We face a very different management style," said Warren W. Furth, the health organization's Assistant Director General for Budget and Finance. "That always makes people nervous."

The change is coming at a time when the health agency must cope with growing problems and decreasing funds. For the two-year budget period covering 1986-1987, Dr. Mahler cut spending by \$35 million. For 1988 and 1989, he has trimmed another \$50 million from the organization's \$634 million budget. The United States wants a further \$25 million cut from the budget.

The United States contribution to the agency's 1988 budget, the largest of any nation, is \$74.7 million, followed by Japan's allocation, which is \$31.5 million.