

Terror In a Legal Vacuum

By C. L. Sulzberger

GENEVA—One of the most frightening aspects of contemporary society has been the sudden and rapid spread of violent acts, whether kidnappings, hijacking of aircraft, political murder as in Northern Ireland, or terrorism of civilians as in the Middle East.

Political violence is no new phenomenon but it has never been so commonplace. As long ago as the early 1900's bank robberies to obtain funds for revolutionary purposes were familiar in Czarist Russia. Stalin, Molotov, Litvinov and other subsequently famous Communists were connected with such operations.

But nowadays, with improved weapons, communications systems, and the spread of technical information, these disagreeable occurrences have become unhappily widespread. In South America, North America, Africa, Asia and Europe there have been numerous kidnappings and hijackings in recent years, many of which have pretended to at least some direct connection with political causes.

Unfortunately, however, no adequate international treaties have yet been drafted and signed with the purpose of rendering such actions more difficult to carry out and easier for the world to prevent or punish. An international conference in Rome last August and September sought to devise new means of protecting civil aircraft from hijackers. However, the conference failed although it did manage ruefully to agree that similar conferences in Tokyo in 1963, the Hague in 1970 and Montreal in 1971 had not succeeded in achieving their announced purposes.

There is not yet even an effective accord on the extradition of hijackers despite the fact that three drafts have been submitted to the International

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Civil Aviation Organization (I.C.A.O.) by Russia, the Scandinavian countries, and Britain-France-Switzerland.

The only apparently positive action so far taken to block the global spread of terrorism has been the development by several major intelligence services of sizable files on terrorist movements. According to Miles Copeland, a former C.I.A. associate and consultant, by

last year exchanges of records were so complete that many persons planning terrorist acts were spotted en route to their targets and thwarted.

He writes in a forthcoming book about intelligence, called "Without Cloak or Dagger," that a computerized file that can produce complete and instantaneous information on many terrorist organizations has been established under the name of "Octopus" in Langley, Va., by the C.I.A.

At the same time the United States Government has set up an interdepartmental terrorist task force under Ambassador Armin H. Meyer, former envoy to various Middle Eastern nations and Japan. These task forces and computerized files apparently frequently share information with British, French, Japanese, West German and other governments working to frustrate terrorist activities.

But any week a glance at the world's press provides sufficient evidence to show that such clandestine cooperation is still far from adequate to the task. Day after day we read of crimes involving everything from the kidnapping of an American heiress or of a British businessman in Argentina to the hijacking of aircraft filled with equally innocent passengers.

There will be no way of truly clamping down on this until sufficiently precise international treaties are drafted and ratified to block such occurrences. The only way this can really be done is to obtain agreement from the world's major nations that there will be immediate extradition of anyone involved in such illegal acts, regardless of the offender's political ideology, so that offenses can be fairly judged and punished.

Prof. Miodrag Trajkovic of the University of Belgrade law faculty said in an article some time ago: "All states are agreed on one thing—that they must strive for the security of civil aviation and the total elimination of hijacking although they differ on the methods and timing for achieving this objective."

However, the Yugoslav legal authority warned that "a great deal of diplomatic persuasion and patient work will be needed to generate the spirit and optimism required for approaching a solution to these problems.

"Until such time as this is possible," he reasoned, "the governments of all countries will have to shoulder the responsibility for the security of international air traffic whose significance and prosperity must not be allowed to suffer in spite of the international community admitting that, owing to the divergent political and economic interests of its members, it is not at present in a position to attain effective agreement."

This is the setting. Everyone by now recognizes the gravity of the problem. Yet hardly anyone is prepared to do what is necessary.