

Poverty and the pearl

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OVER the last few years, as the world's conscience has become troubled more and more by the growing plight of those countries that still exist below the poverty line, Switzerland has been playing a humanitarian role far out of proportion to its size.

Of course the Swiss have long been known for their concern for the under-privileged. Through the pages of history runs such never-to-be-forgotten names as Heinrich Pestalozzi and Henri Dunant.

But today, as the gap between the very rich and the very poor nations gets wider and wider, the need for help from affluent nations becomes ever more urgent.

How is present-day Switzerland rising to the challenge? To find out **DEREK MEAKIN** flew 5,000 miles to a land that is facing acute poverty, the Indian Ocean island of Sri Lanka – or Ceylon as it was in the days when it was called the pearl of the British Empire.

Poverty and the Pearl

IT WAS the middle of the afternoon, Swiss time, on the First of August as the group gathered round in an attentive semi-circle and chargé d'affaires Claude Ochsenbein started to deliver his patriotic address.

His notes were illuminated by the light from a blazing bonfire from which curling tongues of flames licked the night sky and showers of sparks competed with the fireflies darting among the decorative palms that surrounded this tropical garden.

The air was heavy with heat, for this was Sri Lanka, just 10 degrees north of the equator, and the top talking point among the Swiss was the letters from home and what a terrible summer the folks back in Switzerland were having this year.

For most it was their first meeting with the chargé d'affaires, who had only arrived in the island's capital of Colombo earlier this year to reopen the Swiss Embassy. It had been shut down for some years as a result of the isolationist policies of the country's previous Marxist government, which had effectively ordered a standstill of all Sri Lanka's exports and imports.

During the time the embassy was closed Switzerland's interests were looked after by a very energetic gentleman called Edmond Chanson, in whose

garden we were now celebrating the Swiss National Day.

A former managing director of one of the island's leading companies, Volanka – a subsidiary of Volkart Brothers of Winterthur – he acted as Swiss Consul, and for good measure took on the job of Consul-General for Norway at the same time. Now that the embassy is functioning again he has been given the title of Trade Commissioner.

He is also the leading light of the island's only Swiss society, the Circle Suisse, which at the moment only meets once a year – on the First of August – but which is expected to become much more active in view of the growing number of Swiss now going to Sri Lanka.

At present there are around 80 living and working on the island. There are about a dozen Swiss girls employed by travel companies, helping to look after the ever-increasing number of European tourists who succumb to the publicity about the island paradise in the Indian Ocean.

A number of Swiss women have married Sri Lankans. One is the wife of a hotel proprietor

in the new tourist resort of Bentota, another is married to a gem merchant in the hill country capital of Kandy, a third to one of the most highly respected doctors in Colombo.

There are also a number of Swiss businessmen of the old school, some of whom have been here since the end of the war.

There is even a Swiss who came here to espouse the

Buddhist religion and who now lives in a hillside grotto in the centre of the island, where he is said to be more Buddhist than the monks who in their bright saffron-coloured robes and black umbrellas are seen everywhere in Sri Lanka.

But a new generation of Swiss are now making the twice-a-week 11½ hour flight from Zurich and Geneva. They are the pioneers who, with the active support of the Swiss Government and a number of private charities, are helping to put one of the poorest countries in the world on the road to self-sufficiency.

The abject poverty of the Sri Lankans has to be experienced to be believed. The average tourist, cocooned against the harsh reality of village life in the make-believe world of one of the new holiday complexes, knows little of the suffering and the pitiful malnutrition faced by the majority of the people.

Even some of the well-heeled Swiss munching their bratwurst and cervelas in this lush Colombo suburb reserved for the island's aristocracy seemed



Edmond Chanson and his wife at the August 1 celebrations.



Perched patiently on their poles . . . the fishermen of Sri Lanka

to want to turn their eyes away from the appalling conditions in which most of their own workers are forced to live.

I heard of one Swiss who is paying his driver, who has served him faithfully for many, many years, a monthly salary of 100 rupees – less than £3.

Others, more aware of the seething discontent that just lies below the surface, are fearful of what the future might bring. One told me: "It may not be long before the whole country erupts into the most terrible conflict."

It nearly happened while I was there. Faced with soaring prices in the shops and mounting unemployment the unions called a general strike, and some of the more militant tried to

sabotage essential services.

The government moved quickly. They proclaimed a state of emergency and clamped on a strict press censorship, which resulted in the newspapers filling their columns with a long hymn of praise to the president and premier for their courageous stand.

They also took firm – some

would say callous – action by sacking all those absent from their place of work the day the strike was called, refusing to pay wages owed to them and confiscating union funds.

They knew they would have no difficulty in filling the posts from the long queues of unemployed – and ensured that workers will think very hard in

‘It may not be long before the whole country erupts into the most terrible violence’

future before resorting to strike action.

It is into this bubbling cauldron of conflicting emotions that Switzerland, mindful of the obligations of a rich country to one that is trying to escape from its primitive past, is prepared to pour in men, materials and money.

Such aid to Third World countries was laid down in a Swiss law which came into force on July 1, 1977, which called for help "towards putting these countries in a position to achieve development by their own efforts".

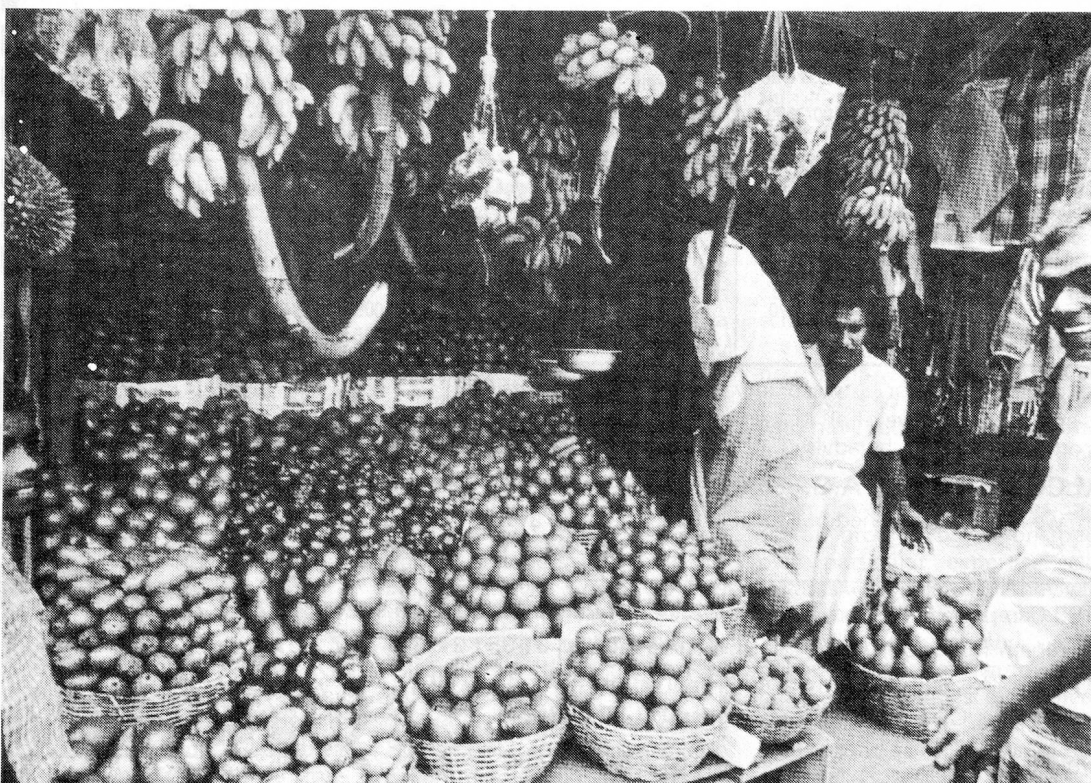
Chargé d'affaires Ochsenbien will shortly be signing an agreement with the Sri Lanka authorities for an animal husbandry and dairy development project which will cost Switzerland £413,000.

"Helping the poorest people in the poorest regions is, we feel, the best way Switzerland can aid a developing country", said this polished diplomat, whose travels on behalf of the Department of Foreign Affairs have taken him to most parts of the world, from the USA to deepest Africa.

"We have chosen five districts in the east of Sri Lanka where Swiss experts will spend at least 10 years. But they won't be doing all the work themselves. An important part of the programmes is teaching local people how to make best use of the resources that are available".

Another important project on which the Swiss Government is spending £335,000 is instructing Sri Lankans how to make use of the thousands of pictures beamed back by US satellites when they pass over the island once every 18 days at a height of 562 miles.

Scientists attached to the



It is a land of poverty . . . and plenty

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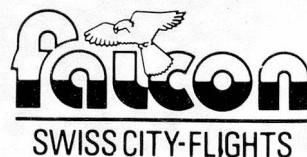
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Department of Geography at Zurich University started by studying and analysing the photographs to see how they could be used to show which areas of land would be best suited for the planting of certain crops. Pilot agricultural programmes based on their recommendations are now under way.

One of the scientists I met, who was celebrating the First of August with his wife, was 30-year-old Urs Geiser from Aarau, now six months into his two-year contract.

By comparing satellite pictures with low-level aerial photographs and land surveys, he is monitoring changes in land use, providing vital information for government planners. For instance, by studying the area under paddy cultivation they can estimate rice yields, which will give them advance warning as to how much rice will have to be imported.

Both these projects are in addition to a number of schemes being carried out by Swiss charities, with financial help from the Swiss Government. One, costing £519,000 of Government money, is for a plant to produce sterile water for the Sri Lankan pharmaceutical industry.

Helvetas has been given £100,000 to help dig wells in remote rural communities; Unicef has been promised £42,000 to improve rural health services and to finance its vaccination and education campaigns; Caritas is to get £24,000 to pay for tons of powdered milk to be delivered to poor villagers.

One of the most ambitious projects is by Terre des Hommes, a charity which receives a lot of public support in Switzerland because it has the lowest administration expenses and most of its workers receive no salary.

In the last year they have created from scratch an entire village for 850 people which those who have seen it have told me is a perfect example of what can be achieved. The men of the village are street cleaners — the lowest cast of all — in the tea country resort of Nuwara Eliya. Many were homeless. All were living in the most appalling conditions.

But now their whole life style has changed. They have their own gardens, where they are growing fruit and vegetables. They have schools and nurseries, for which Terre des



Villagers dig a well to tap a vital need in Sri Lanka — water. Swiss experts are helping to provide wells in remote parts of the island.

Hommes have supplied teachers.

The village, built through the generosity of ordinary Swiss people, is a startling contrast to the simple, doorless, windowless mud huts thatched with dried palm branches in which the majority of rural Sri Lankans are forced to live.

Soon two more groups will arrive on the island.

There are 10,000 lepers in Sri Lanka — outcasts who are stoned if they attempt to go near a village. Emmaus, a Swiss organisation that specialises in the plight of lepers, wants to see them rehabilitated — and is prepared to spend £130,000 a year until leprosy is completely eradicated.

The work is to be carried out by a courageous Swiss called Marcel Farine who, when he was a top official with the Universal Postal Union, spent all his evenings and weekends working on behalf of lepers and now his children have grown up has retired from a very well-paid job to devote the rest of his life towards alleviating the lepers' suffering.

The other organisation is Swiss Contact, which is to set up a centre to teach Sri Lankans how to repair agricultural

machinery, a lot of which is lying idle all over the country because of lack of expertise in elementary mechanics.

The necessity for such a centre highlights one of Sri Lanka's growing problems — the pitiful lack of trained personnel, caused by the exodus of what specialists there are to more lucrative jobs in the Middle East, where they can earn 10 times their Sri Lankan salary. This brain drain is now a top talking point with European experts, who are finding it increasingly difficult to find local people sufficiently knowledgeable to recruit to their training schemes.

Another promising scheme now being worked out by Swiss Contact is to find Swiss people who have retired and have time on their hands who would be prepared to go to Sri Lanka and other developing countries and set up projects based on their own particular expertise. No salaries will be paid. All they will receive will be expenses.

Finally, after lengthy secret negotiations, the wraps are finally off the biggest aid project of them all — devised by Switzerland's best-known multinational, Nestlé.

Within the next two years they

are to build a giant powdered milk factory at a cost of £9,350,000. Until it is in production the company is to set up a private educational programme to teach farmers how to improve their milk yield.

For the Sri Lankans, dependent for the bulk of their milk on overseas suppliers, Nestlé's ultimate aim is nothing short of miraculous — to make the island completely self-sufficient in milk within the next 10 years.

Nor is this all. Nestlé's venture could have other far-reaching implications for Sri Lanka. Other multi-nationals, seeing one of the biggest in the league choosing this poverty-stricken island for such an ambitious venture, could well follow suite.

If that should happen primitive Sri Lanka could well find itself plucked out of its miserable past and thrown well and truly into the 20th century.

The only big question then will be: Will the country's shaky political system be capable of coping with such a traumatic leap through time?

And that was the question none of the Swiss I talked to on that hot and humid evening of the First of August were prepared to hazard an answer.