



Inside the court of 'dictator' M'Bow

LAST THURSDAY morning the director-general of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation was not at his best. At 11 am, Amadou Mahtar M'Bow began to deliver what was supposed to be a much-needed pep talk to 2,400 of his staff assembled in the vast conference hall at Unesco's Paris headquarters. Instead, he depressed them still further.

He railed against the "ignorance and partisanship" of those who had complained that their road to promotion was blocked because they were Western Europeans. And he threatened those who "leaked" information about Unesco to the outside world. The normally eloquent M'Bow frequently lost his place in his notes and failed to finish sentences. At times he lapsed into incoherence.

But if the once widely admired M'Bow is losing his touch it is little wonder. Last month's decision by the United States to pull out of Unesco at the end of this year has plunged the often-troubled organisation into the gravest crisis in its 38-year history. Yet people from dozens of its member states - both diplomats and members of the demoralised and apprehensive secretariat - are close to applauding the US decision.

They hope that the prospect of Unesco losing its American funding - 25 per cent of its budget - will at last stop the organisation's degeneration into a forum for anti-Western extremists. They also hope that, more immediately, it will secure M'Bow's resignation. "What the US has done," said one Asian diplomat last week, "is highlight the warts on M'Bow's face."

The warts most often cited are: paranoia, vanity, cupidity and intolerance.

The paranoia showed up soon after M'Bow became director-general 10 years ago. He had proved himself an efficient administrator as the director of Unesco's education programme. In his new

● In 1974 Amadou Mahtar M'Bow became the first African to be elected to a top post in the United Nations system. As director-general of Unesco he was welcomed for his intelligence and courage. But today Unesco is in the deepest crisis ever faced by a UN organisation - and M'Bow is the main culprit. What has gone wrong?

ROSEMARY RIGHTER reports

exalted position, M'Bow said he feared for his life. To minimise the risks of travelling from home to office, a spacious penthouse - with a splendid terrace - was carved out of space in the top two floors of Unesco's headquarters in the Place de Fontenay.

To keep the penthouse warm, the heating system for the entire building has to be kept on day and night. But, alone among the top UN officials, M'Bow pays no rent for his privileged residence.

M'Bow pays for little else either. Although he has a princely hospitality allowance, some of his entertainment bills turn up for payment from the regular budget. One of his exclusive fleet of six official cars has been used to drive his wife to Brussels to visit his daughter. When he travels, which he does for at least one third of the year, he claims a subsistence allowance although host government often pick up the bills.

He travels with an entourage which is often three times larger than that of the secretary-general of the UN itself (a post he covets, along with the Nobel Peace Prize) and he has an insatiable appetite for awards and decorations. A former colleague describes

him as a magpie: "He likes everything which glitters."

Although Unesco rules prohibit the acceptance of official tributes unless they are clearly for services outside the organisation, he is the freeman of 11 cities and lists 35 decorations in his official biography. The same rules frown on the acceptance of honorary doctorates by Unesco staff without the permission of the director-general: since 1974, M'Bow has given himself permission to accept 42, plus three honorary professorships and three gold medals from Eastern bloc universities.

These peccadilloes might not matter but for his extraordinary intolerance. He is obsessed by what he sees as others' racism, he has become a fanatical Moslem, and he has developed a profound anti-Western bias. He imposes these views on Unesco's secretariat by maintaining a vice-like control. He vets every professional appointment and few decisions can be taken without his approval.

Any criticism is liable to send him into one of his now famous rages. Representatives of Unesco's member states who have attempted to question the budget, the failure of plans to appear when they are due, or the content of programmes have been publicly bawled out by M'Bow at meetings of the executive board or at the general conference.

Ambassadors to Unesco who have attempted criticism have found M'Bow's door firmly closed to them thereafter, and he has had at least two envoys recalled by their governments. In the past three years, 20 of his most senior staff have resigned in disgust: one, a Mexican, left Paris denouncing what he described as "bureaucratic terrorism which has led to total intellectual suffocation".

In short, the director-general of Unesco has become, and is widely known as, its "dictator". His resignation is a prerequisite to any chance of the Americans changing their decision to quit. But can he be made to go? And, even if he can, has Unesco already been irreparably damaged?

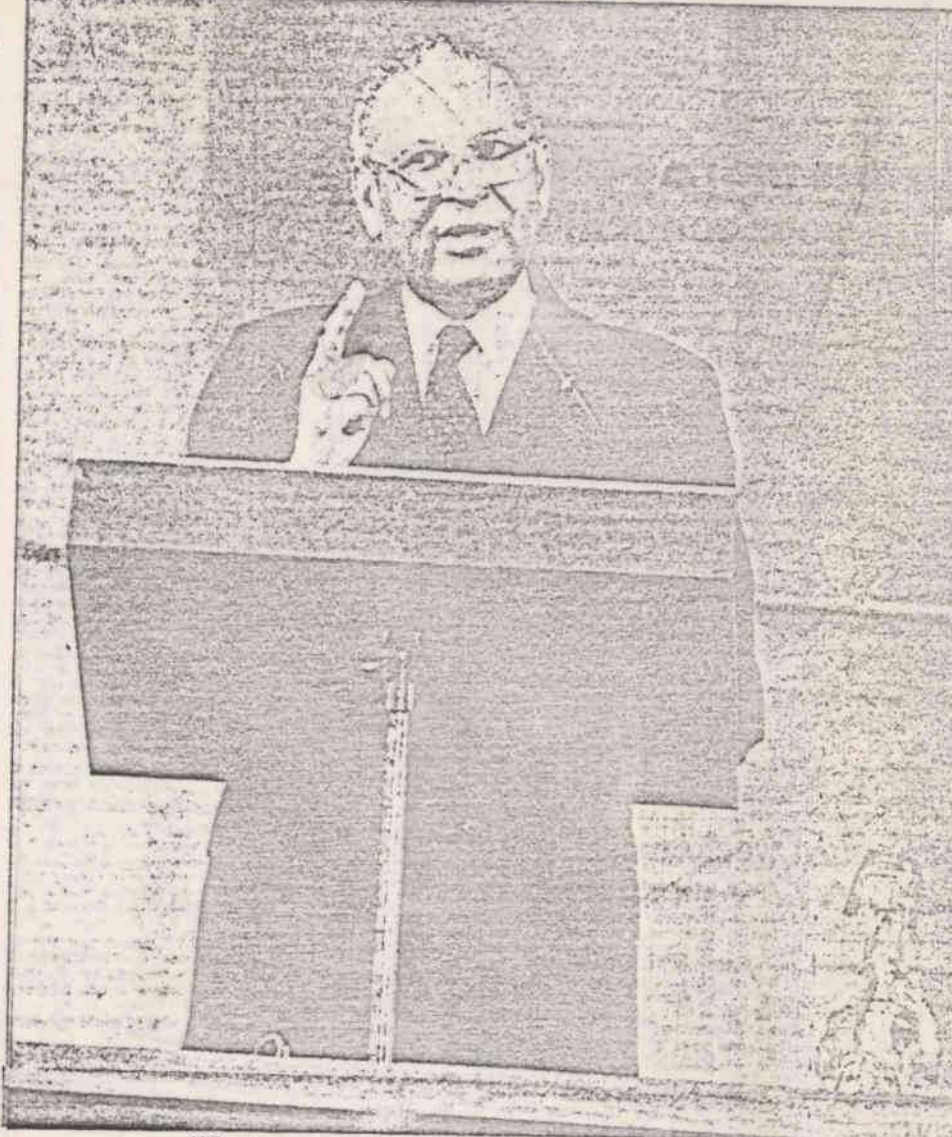
EVEN BEFORE M'Bow took over, all was not well with Unesco. Created in London - with strong British support - in November 1945, it was supposed to build "the defence of peace" by promoting the free flow of ideas and culture across international frontiers. But once the Soviet Union and its satellites joined the organisation, there was bound to be conflict over which ideas should be promoted. Gradually, Unesco became more and more politicised as the Western member states found themselves outnumbered by communist and Third World countries.

In 1970, Rene Maheu, M'Bow's predecessor, crossed a dangerous Rubicon when he decided that, in future, Unesco should concern itself, not just with the flow of news and information, but with its content.

The trend has accelerated under M'Bow, most notably through his enthusiastic promotion of a "new world information order". In part this expresses legitimate Third World ambitions to build up its own media to compete with the dominant Western press. But at Unesco it has rapidly evolved into undisguised or thinly veiled attacks on the whole idea of a free press.

Under M'Bow a similar politicisation has infected many of Unesco's best ideas - such as its campaign to combat illiteracy. And its former emphasis on practical work - promoting sound management of the environment, mapping changes in the world's climate and ocean currents, training teachers, and providing basic assistance in the sciences - is increasingly giving way to emphasis on woolly, anti-Western theories. Once a champion of

Photograph by Duncan Baxter



Gerard: blunt critic.

ambassador until last year. "It is that Western governments still dismiss what happens at Unesco as 'mere rhetoric' - in this century, when we have suffered so terribly from what rhetoric has done to whole nations."

Under Reagan the US changed tack. Its ambassador, Jean Gerard, a prominent Republican party lawyer and fund-raiser, speaks perfect French and has been a hard-working and formidable emissary.

Last June she and Gregory Newell, an assistant US secretary of state, warned M'Bow that the US would not tolerate his new budget - which on American calculations was up by 25 per cent.

M'Bow lost his temper and said they could not treat him like "an American black who has no rights". The Americans left the room.

THE THREATENED departure of the US could have one of two consequences.

Unesco could become even worse. Jean Ping, the Gabonese ambassador who speaks for the African group, said last week: "The less money we have, the more we will talk politics. Resolutions on peace, Russian-style, cost nothing."

The second possibility is that "a process of healing" could start. Governments both in the West and the Third World who are disenchanted with Unesco's programmes and management could reassert control.

But real reform would require M'Bow's departure. Formally, he can be dismissed only by the full general conference of 161 member states - and that is improbable. But he might be persuaded to resign, as have four out of five of Unesco's previous director-generals.

Some observers in Unesco believe that M'Bow's nerve has failed. Yesterday, he abruptly left Paris for Spain on a hastily scheduled trip - without even replying to the US letter announcing its withdrawal.

As the staff filed out of the Paris conference hall last Thursday one official asked another: "How long do you give him?" The reply: "six months."

M'Bow harangues Unesco staff last Thursday: how long can he hang on?

individual human rights. Unesco is now promoting the "rights of peoples" and its conferences on culture ring with attacks on Western "cultural imperialism."

Staff members who object to these trends are understandably cautious because M'Bow has put 84 per cent of them on contracts of two years or less.

The morale in Paris - where all but 20 of the staff are based - is at rock bottom because of mismanagement. The director of personnel, Serge Vieux - the cousin of M'Bow's Haitian wife - is underqualified for the post. A staff association poll, conducted last year revealed that fewer than 4 per cent of the staff believed that Unesco recruited on the basis of competence; only 2.5 per cent believed that promotions were related to efficiency.

Able staff are leaving, citing what Pierre de Senarclens of Switzerland, called in his signature letter "a climate of suspicion, prejudice, intolerance, incoherence, arbitrariness, fear and servility."

The organisation is so secretive that even the daily collection of press clippings about Unesco is marked "for internal use only" and denied not only to the press but to the diplomats accredited to Unesco.

The budget itself, which is continuing to grow - against the wishes of major contributors and in contrast to spending in the rest of the UN - is so opaque that no government knows the precise rate of increase. M'Bow came to office pledging total budgetary "transparency," but last year he arbitrarily threw out the "constant dollar" accounting method, rendering comparisons with previous years impossible. T. C. Young, the Chinese in charge, comments with justification that "no body on the outside will ever understand it."

All of this - and M'Bow's misuse of a special account which he personally administers to provide scholarships and travel grants in breach of Unesco rules - led the Americans to vote against the budget at the last general conference. But the Americans were motivated by more than anger over money. M'Bow, in their view, is uncomfortably close to the communist bloc.

He is a frequent visitor to Bulgaria where he takes holidays with his family as the guest of the head of state and has engineered the holding of the next general conference in Sofia. He cooperated with the Russians in November by helping to get Mongolia elected to the board through African votes. He backed a pro-Soviet Indian candidate, T. K. Kaul, to chair the board. And, again to please the Russians, M'Bow is quietly backing a move to destroy the machinery by which individuals can complain to Unesco over violation of their human rights.

The Russians have successfully used Unesco to promote their own brand of disarmament and as a centre for espionage. Of the 47 Soviet

agents expelled by France last year, 12 were from Unesco - nine on the delegation, three employed in the secretariat. The three still draw their salaries and one has even had his contract extended.

A cartoon which appeared in a French magazine last week summarised what Unesco has become: "For information, read censorship; for education, propaganda; for tolerance, racism; for democracy, imperialism. An exaggeration, but not by much. At a recent Unesco three-day homage to Karl Marx, Henry Lopes, the assistant director-general representing M'Bow, contributed the view that "Marxism plays an essential

role in the defence of human rights and the right of people to decide for themselves."

Jean Gerard, the US ambassador to Unesco, says the organisation has become dangerous; "It legitimises programmes which promote the idea of state control. It is so skewed, so distorted, so far from its basic purposes, that I do not feel we have a right to state it be an accomplice."

DESPITE the warnings, M'Bow never believed that the US would pull out. According to his associates, when he got the news on December 28 he went into a state of shock for three days. His surprise is understand-

able. For years the US, along with the rest of the West, had grumbled about Unesco but done nothing. "In no other part of the UN system could a director-general get away with a tenth of what M'Bow has done," says one Third World diplomat. "And your governments say so little, we conclude it happens with yours connivance."

The criticism is fair. With a few exceptions - such as Denmark, Australia, Switzerland and the Netherlands - the West has accorded Unesco low priority, and assigned junior, or tired, diplomats to it.

"What bothers me," says Owen Harnes, Australia's