

Traffic in Women and Children.—On the 29th September the Assembly discussed the Report of the Fifth Committee on Traffic in Women and Children (Document A. 132). It was expected that the debate would be lengthy owing to the obstructionist policy which the French delegate had pursued in committee, and expectation was not falsified. As you know, this abominable traffic for many years gave great anxiety to both Governments and humanitarians. In 1904 an agreement on the subject (then known as the “white slave traffic”) was concluded between certain Governments with the object of suppressing the traffic. This agreement was, in 1910, embodied in a Convention. With the outbreak of war conditions changed, and soon, owing to passport and other difficulties, the traffic ceased; but with a return to something approaching the normal it is again in operation, and if it is to be suppressed, or at any rate lessened, both law and administrative regulations must be improved. With this object in view the International Conference on Traffic in Women and Children which met in Geneva in the summer of this year made a number of recommendations, which are to be found in the Final Act of the Conference (Document C. 223). These recommendations were later embodied in a draft Convention by the British authorities, and Great Britain’s representative on the Council of the League proposed that the States members of the League should be invited to sign it. The French objection was not one of substance, but of form. The delegate from France did not deny that it was most desirable to suppress the traffic, but he strenuously opposed the opening of a Convention under the auspices of the League, arguing that to do this would be to create a precedent. In vain it was pointed out that the precedent had already been created at Barcelona during the Conference on Communications and Transit. By a large majority the committee decided to recommend a Convention, but, in order to satisfy the fears of France and of any who objected with her, appointed a small drafting committee with the object of providing that the draft Convention proposed by Great Britain did not go beyond the Final Act of the Conference, and that there were no divergencies between the French and English texts.

In the Assembly, although the objection of the French was as strong as in committee, their attitude changed: they pleaded the undesirability of either creating a precedent or of departing from diplomatic usage, but begged for time (four months, which was later in the debate reduced to two) to enable the Governments concerned to examine the proposals. But from the very beginning of the discussion it was evident that the majority of the Assembly would vote for the Convention, and an effort to compromise having failed, the recommendation with which Document A. 132 concludes was put to the vote and carried, thirty States voting for and none against, although there were several abstentions, including France.

It is difficult to understand the French attitude. Is explanation to be found in jealousy of another Power which has taken the initiative, or in the fear that Paris, the home of so many conventions, may lose her pride of place in this respect? Or is it to be found in some other explanation, which, so far, has not been forthcoming?

I enclose several copies of the Convention (Document A. 125) as revised by the drafting committee. This I signed on behalf of New Zealand on the 1st October, having been shown a telegram stating that the necessary powers from His Majesty the King were on the way. . . .

It is to be hoped that with the adoption of this Convention, and the bringing into force of new laws and regulations necessitated thereunder, the death-blow will have been struck to an abomination which has caused untold misery to the innocent.

Opium.—On the 30th September the Assembly dealt with the committee’s report (Document A. 143) on the traffic in opium, which it adopted unanimously. Unfortunately the report is not, at first sight, quite clear to one who has not followed the debates in committee. It is based on one made to the Council by the Advisory Committee on Traffic in Opium (Document A. 38), containing, on page 6, certain recommendations which were not, however, wholly accepted by the Council.

Recommendation 1, slightly altered in form but not in substance, was accepted by the Council and adopted in committee.

Reference to recommendation 2, relative to an annual report to be made to the League by each country which is a party to the Convention, was, although approved by the Council, omitted in its resolutions. It was restored in committee with the following addition:—

“The Assembly recommends to the Council that the different Governments be invited, where they see no objection, to furnish to the Secretariat, in addition to the official annual report, any information concerning the illicit production, manufacture, or trade in opium or other dangerous drugs which they think likely to be useful to the League in the execution of its task.”

Recommendation 3 was adopted by the Council, but subsequently modified in committee, the committee’s resolution, as passed by the Assembly, reading,—

“The Assembly concurs in paragraph 3 of the Council’s resolution on the understanding that the inquiries undertaken will be of a scientific character, and that, when they apply specifically to any particular country, they will be made through, or with the consent of, the Government of that country.”

Recommendation 4 was approved by the Council and adopted in committee with the following addition:—

“In order to facilitate the execution of the Convention, the Assembly urges all States members of the League which are parties to the convention to signify to the Secretariat as soon as possible their acceptance of the fourth recommendation of the Advisory Committee relating to the requirement of importation certificates.”

Consideration of recommendation 5 was deferred by the Council, and in this the committee concurred.