

Nestle drops 3 libel claims

From ROD CHAPMAN

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Nestle today withdrew three of its four complaints against a Swiss action group which claims its babyfoods are responsible for thousands of deaths in the Third World.

The firm is suing the Third World Action Group of Bern for libel in connection with the group's translation of a War on Want pamphlet. The group changed the title of the pamphlet from "The Baby-killer" to "Nestle Kills Babies" and included some additional material on Nestle's marketing practice.

The Swiss multi-national company claimed at the first session of the hearing last November that it was concerned mainly with the translation of the pamphlet's title.

But it also listed three other charges in the German version which it considered as libelous: the claim that its advertising for babyfoods in developing countries was "unethical and immoral," allegations that its sales methods led to death or injury for thousands of children, and a charge that Nestle dressed its sales girls as nurses. These three charges have now been dropped.

Nestle's chief executive, Arthur Fuerer, told journalists last November that he and other directors concerned with the company's babyfoods would resign in all probability if the claim that Nestle's babyfood advertising was "unethical and immoral" was proved correct.

The court began hearing Nestle's witnesses today, and is expected to complete the case on Thursday. Both sides submitted new dossiers of evidence to the court in February, since when there has been considerable discussion on the subject of powdered babyfoods in such bodies as the UN and the World Health Organisation.

At the end of November — coinciding with the opening session of the Bern trial — Nestle and seven other multinationals clubbed together to form an International Council of Infant Food Industries in Zurich.

The move was attacked as a smokescreen by the Third World Action Group, which also claims that the new council's formulation of a code of ethics on babyfood advertising could not be effective.

The eight companies involved, which include Unigate and the American company Dumex, have agreed to carry out a self-regulation of their advertising and to emphasise that breast feeding is best for babies.