

EDITORIAL

The United Nations has been very active in the environmental sphere during the past four months; hopefully a positive omen at the end of the first year of the UN new development decade.

At its 49th plenary meeting on 30 October, the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted by consensus a 41 power proposal on a "Draft World Charter for Nature", submitted by Zaire (see Environmental Policy and Law 6 (1), 1980, p. 45). Speaking on behalf of the Charter, the representative of Zaire emphasized that it was a duty of each member of the international community to see to it that nature be preserved, maintained, kept up and renewed on a permanent basis while it is being used to meet human needs.

Although the Charter was generally supported, the representative of Brazil, speaking on behalf of the 7 States Parties to the treaty for Amazonian cooperation, stated that poverty and underdevelopment were the major causes of the deterioration of the human environment in the developing countries and these must be eradicated if the environment is to be truly enhanced. In this connection he emphasized that the development of the Amazonian region and the preservation of its environment fell within the exclusive responsibility of the Amazonian countries themselves without any other limitations than those established by the treaty in its article IV, and that the treaty had formed the basis for international cooperation among the parties involved. At the appropriate time, he said, these states would express their views on the draft world charter.

This defensive attitude of the Brazilian representative is very much in contradiction to Brazil's action at the IUCN Council, where it announced that it would declare, within a very short time, a huge area of its territory as a protected area. One could easily draw the conclusion that the protected area is envisaged as a smoke screen to confute the increased criticism levelled at Brazil by the international environmental community.

At the same meeting, the Assembly also adopted a vote of 68 in favour to none against, with 47 abstentions, a draft resolution on the "historical responsibility of states for the preservation of nature for present and future generations", introduced by the USSR. Although different in a number of significant respects, the two texts tend to complement each other and could be said to reinforce the growing recognition by governments of main responsibilities for the protection of nature and of the need for the inclusion of environmental considerations in the development process. While the USSR draft was generally endorsed, it is understandable that a number of states felt that additional time will be needed for more discussions and clarification with the sponsors.

This journal will report in detail on these debates in its next issue.

The agreement to establish a "Common Fund", which opened for signature at the United Nations in New York on 1 October, represents the UN's first real progress towards the New International Economic Order, adopted in 1974. After five years of intense negotiations, the rich and poor nations finally agreed in June to the Common Fund, a new financial institution to stabilise international commodity prices. (See Environmental Policy and Law 5 (3), 1979, p. 127 and 155). The fund will provide much-needed assistance to those poorest Third World countries which are highly dependent on one or two weak commodities, and although it is smaller than the Third World countries desired, it is still potentially a formidable world financial institution.

On the negative side, negotiations between the "haves" and "have nots" over a new deal in trade and aid have reached an all-time low. At vital new talks in New York at a special two-week session of the United Nations General Assembly on the 25th August, the two sides could not even agree on an agenda. The talks were regarded by many countries as the last hope of getting a North-South agreement. The special session was designed to set up a series of negotiations to deal with the immense problems, but the Third World delegates left the meeting convinced that the rich world had no interest in serious negotiations. Informal discussions, as a result of the series of proposals put forward by the Brandt Commission earlier this year, may, hopefully, succeed where the official negotiations have failed.

At the national level, the astonishingly mere 200,000 votes obtained by the Citizen's Party, under the leadership of Barry Commoner, a well-known environmentalist, in the US presidential election, coupled with the Reagan landslide, can prompt a "where have all the environmentalists gone" refrain. The "Greens" in the Federal Republic of Germany did not fare much better in the recent elections there. We feel that the reasons for these fluctuations in the popular vote, as discussed in a previous editorial, are still valid and that the democratic process has no space for a one-purpose party, so no-one is willing to compromise with these groups.

Chancellor Schmidt, following the election, promised to change the nature conservation act to enable conservation organizations to have a grant of standing to sue. He emphasized that there would be no change in the Federal Immission Laws (air pollution, noise, vibration) as opposed to the intentions of President-elect Reagan, who recently reiterated his support for "a revision of cumbersome and overly stringent Clean Air Act regulations". One of the situations where one can hope that election promises will not be kept.