

EDITORIAL

Newspapers and journals wishing to keep up-to-date with breaking news are sometimes in the position of having to change an already prepared Editorial. This has just happened to us. We would have reported on the United Nations General Assembly resolution 242 of 28 July (see page 208) in the normal fashion. But because of the speed of the implementation process, we are very happy to have to do this now. The developing countries, in particular, have been very active (see page 252), so that the UNEP Governing Council's High-Level Committee of Ministers and Officials have reacted very positively (see page 216).

We, who have followed UNEP's development and the problems it has faced since its inception, are amazed at what is foreseen, in accordance with the will of the UN General Assembly. Not only the representatives of the member States are to be congratulated for this achievement, but especially the Coordinator for the resolution, Ambassador Bagher Asadi (Iran) and the Executive Director of UNEP.

So, if the United States were to pay its \$15bn debt to the UN, we think that events could move even faster in the interests of the environment.

Since closing the last issue, the composition of a number of governments has changed and events have brought new realities and personalities to the international scene. For example, the European Union has a new Commission, and we have seen quite a few changes or upheavals in African, Asian and Latin American States. Although this may not have an immediate effect on international environmental policy, we will surely feel some impact on ongoing and future negotiations.

We see the very serious problems, for which a solution is crucial. One example is the totally informal UNEP consultations on biosafety, as Cartagena finished without success (see last issue at page 84). No breakthrough has as yet been achieved, and the discussions will be continued in February 2000. From Switzerland there has been a call to WTO for a more sustainable trade policy. At the same time, there is a feeling that in certain areas where conflicts could arise, some people are pushing too fast, while ongoing disputes are not being settled. Some such problems are to be found in connection with chemicals (see pages 219 and 222).

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We hope that a good decision will be made on priorities under UNDP's new Administrator, now that many countries are cutting their contributions to the Programme due to budget difficulties. The World Bank has also to make decisions in its inter-related fields, and in this connection has been warning on the dangers of decentralisation. According to its just-published annual development report, rising demand for broader participation in politics and local autonomy is affecting the way countries develop. But in many international organisations, such as IUCN, decentralisation was a favourite policy. However, more and more people now realise that when finance becomes scarce, over-decentralisation creates more offices, more bureaucracy and more costs, thus diverting money from where it is really needed on the ground.

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Everyone is talking about the Millennium, including the United Nations General Assembly, which has already decided that the 54th session will close on the 5 September 2000 in the morning, and that the 55th session will open in the afternoon of the same day – followed by the beginning of the Millennium Summit on 6 September. We hope that some input on the concept of sustainable development will also be programmed for that time.

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On 20 September, the ceremony to commemorate the death of Elizabeth Haub was held in Mülheim (see also last issue at page 171). Several people have asked for the full text of the commemorative speech, which is available to readers on request.

Wolfgang B. Steury

1 November, 1999