

North plans to grab South's resources under bio-diversity treaty

by Ramtanu Maitra and Susan Maitra

At the fourth preparatory committee (Prepcom IV) meeting now being held in New York, the final meeting prior to this summer's Earth Summit or "Eco-92," the United States is ardently pushing to put the convention on biological diversity on the agenda. As pointed out by a number of environmentalists here in India, Third World governments would do well to recognize that the signing of the convention would only legitimize exploitation. (Further treatment of Earth Summit preparations appears on p. 38.)

The convention on biological diversity (bio-diversity, for short), seen as a clever move by the developed countries to grab the entire world's germ plasm and turn it into a multibillion-dollar business, has attracted interest in India and most developing nations. The proposed convention will deal not only with conservation of bio-diversity but also with access to the genetic material and related technologies, and the protection of traditional knowledge and practices.

In other words, governments have been asked to sign on the dotted line an agreement which will make their rich biological resources available to an international authority without deriving any benefit from it. The United States, a strong backer of this convention, claims that biotechnological developments from these genetic sources cannot be made available free to the donors because such bio-technology development is done in the private sector.

Jurisdiction questioned

Besides the obviously loaded dice, developing country governments will do well to note whether they have any jurisdiction to hand over those resources that do not belong to the government in the first place. However, at this point, all developing countries, China and India included, are looking at the bottom line, which is money. These governments have taken a stand that if the North wants extra efforts at the bio-diversity convention, then it must provide the funds. No government, however, has pointed to the undemocratic way this convention has been pushed.

In India, the bio-diversity convention has kicked off a debate, but it is anybody's guess whether the government is paying attention to it. It has been pointed out that while the convention helps to globalize the biological resources of the South, the proposals in the Uruguay Round of the General

Agreement on Tariffs and Trade talks will lead to patents on the life forms that will emerge from them.

One of India's leading environmental institutes, the Center for Science and Environment, has asked an even more pertinent question about this convention: whether the government has the right to give away something which does not belong to the government. For instance, in northeastern India, particularly in the states of Meghalaya, Nagaland, and Arunachal Pradesh, the forests belong to the local communities, according to the Constitution of India. Does the Indian government have any right to give away biological specimens from these forests without discussing the convention details with, let alone obtaining permission from, these communities? Perhaps, a more precise question to ask at this point is whether these issues which affect people in general can be decided by a handful of bureaucrats without a public debate, simply because the Rio summit extravaganza has been set for this June?

Significant financial reward

The benefits that the North-based chemical and pharmaceutical companies have reaped from exploiting tropical herbs, has also been noted in India. Anil Agarwal of the Center for Science and Environment has pointed out that *rauwolfia serpentina*, locally known as *sarpagandha*, has been sold in India as an antidote to snake venom and a tranquilizer. Most modern tranquilizers have been developed from this herb, and today *rauwolfia* is a base for drugs which sell up to \$260 million a year in the United States alone. Did India get a penny out of this?

Similarly, the Paris-based Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development has estimated the value of the South's wheat genes to U.S. agriculture at \$500 million a year. Right now, the drug company Merck, Sharpe, and Dohme is trying to obtain an anti-coagulant plant from the Brazilian province of Rondônia. Monsanto has developed contacts with tribes along the Brazil-Peru border to get their hands on 1,000 different herbs. All these deals obviously helped the North, which never paid any royalty for the use of such vital medicines.

So far, the government of India had been less than forthcoming in stating precisely what its stand will be on the bio-

diversity convention. Except for making vacuous remarks like, "India will not accept any convention that infringes on the nation's sovereignty," Minister for Environment Kamal Nath has based all his statements on availability of funds. According to Kamal Nath, the Rio summit will die if the funds are not given. He seems less sure what will happen if the funds are given.

The second treaty agenda

At the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio, it is expected that two international conventions would be put up for signing. While the convention on bio-diversity will be one, the second convention has not been firmed up yet.

Caught in the politics of reelecting a highly unpopular President, the "New Age" crowd in the United States is finding it increasingly difficult to mimic the European Community's position to limit carbon dioxide emissions to 1990 levels by the year 2000.

The convention on climate change ran into opposition from Washington once the Bush administration realized its implications. Testifying before the U.S. Congress, Richard Briggs, vice chairman of the Global Climate Condition, has warned that any measure to sharply reduce greenhouse gas emissions could impose "massive costs" on the U.S. economy—as much as \$95 billion per year, according to one study. Briggs, implying that the large methane release caused by rice paddy cultivation and cattle excreta in the developing nations was a major problem, pointed out that the suggested policies "address only carbon dioxide, and thus ignore methane and other greenhouse gases." Both India and China have made it clear that any discussion on curbing methane emission from paddy cultivation and cattle rearing is not acceptable, since it infringes on the basic foodgrain production process.

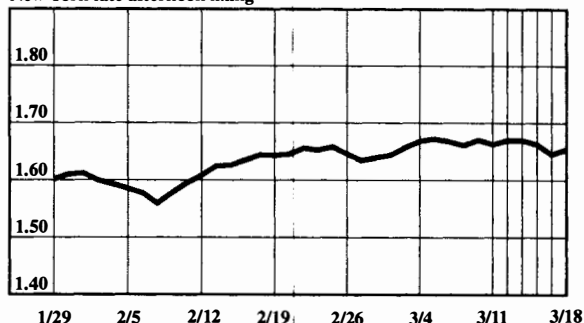
The present U.S. intransigence on the climate convention does not mean that the United States opposes it in principle. Legislation has already been drawn up by a U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee on health and environment that would mandate a curb on emissions at the 1990 levels. President Bush may not have the stomach for it now in the election year. Or, in other words, Bush may find it "politically incorrect" to ask General Motors to announce yet another cut of 100,000 personnel at a time when Bush's economic policy has come under more serious scrutiny by average Americans. Next year it could be different.

If the convention on climate change is not put up for signing, one other convention, beside the convention on bio-diversity, and most likely a convention which would lay the basis for setting up an international pollutant monitoring apparatus, will be put up. Any convention on forestry will face tough opposition from the Third World, and it is unlikely that the United States and others would push that at this point.

Currency Rates

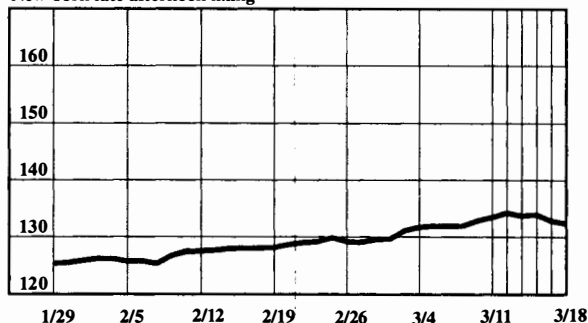
The dollar in deutschemarks

New York late afternoon fixing



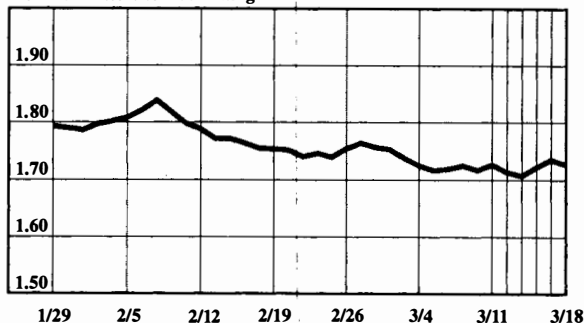
The dollar in yen

New York late afternoon fixing



The British pound in dollars

New York late afternoon fixing



The dollar in Swiss francs

New York late afternoon fixing

