

## 42. UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT (UNCED)

### BACKGROUND

At the forty-fourth United Nations (UN) General Assembly in December 1989, member states passed a resolution which called for a United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) to be held in 1992. The resolution reflected concern about the deterioration of the environment and the connection between that deterioration and development. This concern had its base in a report issued by the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987. The Commission was headed by the Prime Minister of Norway, Gro Harlem Brundtland, and the report, which had a large public readership in addition to the United Nations community which had requested it, was titled *Our Common Future*. The report concluded that the balance between the environment and development depended on sustainable development: the ability to improve the life of the population in a way that draws on the environment and earth itself, only to the extent that will ensure its sustainability in the future.

The conference was held from 2 to 14 June 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil and was dubbed the "Earth Summit." The actual results from the conference were mixed. In the extensive preparatory work done prior to the conference the two key issues to emerge related to economics and the North-South divide. Developing countries made clear that they would need financial assistance if they were to carry out their economic development within the restrictions being discussed, and criticized the reluctance of developed states to come forward with such assistance.

On a related issue, the United States -- the government with the most cautious and reluctant approach of all the Western countries -- announced just prior to the conference that it would not be signing the convention protecting plants and animals on the verge of extinction (the Biodiversity Convention, see below) because of the limits it would place on US biotechnology development, the effect it might have on US patent protection for biological inventions, and the method of financial support for developing nations. This latter announcement threatened to disrupt the conference, but in the end did not result in a sudden withdrawal from other conventions as was feared. In part this potential for failure was overcome by announcements from several developed states including Canada, Australia and the European Community that they would sign the Biodiversity Convention. It is expected that the US will be virtually isolated from 150 other states in its refusal to sign the treaty.