UNCSTD at half time: North stands firm

UNCSTD is only half way through. Yet already it seems clear that whatever emerges from the conference at the end of this week will be less a function of what the developing countries want than of what the developed countries are prepared to give them — and that this is unlikely to be very substantial.

The turning point came last Friday. Up to that point, the main focus of discussion in the working groups had been the proposal put forward by the Group of 77 that the conference should agree to establish a new financing mechanism for science and technology for development, based largely on "automatic" contributions from developed countries calculated according to a pre-agreed formula, and scheduled to reach \$2 billion by 1985 and \$4 billion by 1990.

The US, which would be the prime contributor to such a fund, had already indicated that they found such a proposal unrealistic. Their opposition was based not so much on the size of the fund, but the way in which contributions would be assessed. Automatic contributions, they claimed, were incompatible with congressional feelings about the aid budget. If anything, extra funds should be strictly on a voluntary basis.

On Wednesday, the Group of 77 asked the developed countries directly whether they were prepared to support an overall increase in funds for science and technology for development. A meeting of ministers from the member countries of the European Economic Community took place on Thursday afternoon to consider the question — but failed to reach a consensus. At one end Britain's Minister for Overseas Development, Mr Neil Marten, argued that the recent cuts in Britain's public spending meant there was no money left for new aid purposes. At the other, the Danes, keen to build a progressive image among certain Third World constituencies, argued that a commitment to providing new funds could and should be made.

The EEC's failure to reach agreement had an unexpected effect. When it was announced, the Tunisian delegation, which is leading the negotiations for the Group of 77 and had been receiving some internal criticism for not being sufficiently tough, walked out of the committee room and, at a hastily arranged press conference, announced that they were leaving unless things moved a bit faster.

The next day, Friday, things did begin to move — but not entirely in the way that the Group of 77 would have wished. The EEC presented an answer to their question, saying merely that the member countries' budgets for technological development were growing in real terms, and that additional resources for science and technology "will be available subject to the priorities made in requests from the

developing countries". (The US had already said that they were prepared to agree to providing some extra funding).

Soon after the EEC reply, however, Sweden tabled a set of proposals suggesting among other things a very different mechanism than the one proposed by the Group of 77, in the hope that it might form the basis of a compromise proposal on which everyone at the conference might eventually agree.

Central to the package of proposals, which had been prepared by the United Nations Development Programme (see page 710), was the idea that the developed countries should commit themselves to contributing immediately to a more modest fund and, together with the developing countries, work on ways of increasing both contributions and uses of the money at a later date.

This proposal, which many had been expecting, but not quite so soon, put the Group of 77 in a difficult position. On the one hand, they had not been able to convince the developed countries that their own financing demands were reasonable. On the other, it was difficult for them to show that the Sweden/UNDP proposal was unreasonable. Yet it was already known that the US had indicated they would probably support the latter; and this itself was sufficient for the G77 to be sceptical.

The Group's reaction was to play for time. The US and the EEC, which both said they found the Swedish proposals "interesting", suggested that more details should be heard from UNDP administrator Mr Bradford Morse, who was already waiting in the wings. The Tunisian delegation, still under pressure from several of the more militant G77 countries, asked for time to consider the Swedish proposals prior to hearing Mr Morse — who subsequently agreed to reappear on Monday morning (returning to Paris in the mean-time).

The mere fact that the proposal was on the table, however, and that everyone knew it was possibly the only basis for a compromise agreement, meant that the whole initiative had passed from the Group of 77 to the developed countries. Indeed it became clear that some of the more powerful of the Group of 77, who had so far played a relatively back-seat role in the negotiations, did so partly because they were more in favour of the UNDP plan, but were reluctant to be seen splitting G77 solidarity.

By Monday, the whole tone of the conference was different from the previous week. No-one was pretending that the G77's demand on the financial commitments was likely to be accepted, indeed with the first working group, concentrating on methods for building up indigenous infrastructures and the transfer

of technology from developed to developing countries, progressing even slower than expected, it was becoming increasingly unlikely that the conference would produce a plan of action at all.

At the same time the central issue for discussion shifted — as the US had planned from the outset that it should — from the financial to the institutional aspects. The G77 had proposed that a new intergovernmental committee be established directly under the United Nations. The US, in contrast, argued strongly that the central co-ordinating mechanism for science and technology issues within the UN system remain under the aegis of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

On Friday the EEC, partly at the suggestion of the British delegation, who had earlier heard some harsh things spoken about their uncompromising stand on the financial issue, put forward a proposal which it was hoped would meet the demands of both sides. This was that an intergovernmental committee, open to all states who wished to attend, should be established by the General Assembly. But that it should report to the Assembly through ECOSOC (which, however, would not be allowed to do any more than add comments to the report).

At the time of going to press, it was still unclear how this issue was likely to be resolved. The EEC proposal had received support from the G77. But on Monday, the US announced that they were still adamant the committee should be appointed by ECOSOC, leading the G77 to issue a statement claiming that the UNCSTD conference had suffered "a serious setback because of the position of one major country."

The Group of 77 added that they hoped the situation would change, but that "the position at present does not bode well". In reply, the US issued a statement regretting "that some countries appear to have misinterpreted or misunderstood some parts of the US position." How much of this was pure negotiating tactics, diverting attention from more significant issues — like the role and status to be given to the secretariat which will service this committee, and whether it should be based in New York, Geneva, Vienna, or some third world country — remains to be seen.

By Monday, the two sides in the negotiations had come sufficiently close to make most observers optimistic that there would be no sudden breakdown in negotiations, and that there was sufficient interest on both sides to engineer a "successful" outcome to the conference. In the process, however, it was clear that most of the more controversial of the developing countries demands had been slowly whittled away during the negotiating process.

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