

**nature**

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## Law of the Sea: five years of negotiations

IN two weeks' time the United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea will be back in session yet again; a four-week period in New York constitutes the 'resumed seventh session' in a series which now extends over almost five years. Among the main outstanding issues which are certain to get much attention in New York are the shape and form of an International Sea-Bed Authority and how to reconcile the interests of those states for whom a 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone around their territory is unsatisfactory.

The conference has been through a difficult time these past few months, indeed there have been times when it could have collapsed altogether; it is largely as a result of these difficulties that delegates find themselves back at the negotiating table so soon after a session in Geneva in April. For at that time a major dispute flared up over the presidency of the conference by Mr Hamilton Amerasinghe. Mr Amerasinghe, of Sri Lanka, had been president for all previous sessions and his continuation in the post would have satisfied most delegations, but a new government in Sri Lanka was, for party-political reasons, in no mood to let Mr Amerasinghe stay in its delegation. Two weeks in Geneva were wasted on this matter, and when a means was found of allowing Mr Amerasinghe to stay on as president for the seventh session, many Latin American delegates staged a noisy walkout and threatened to take the question of his presidency to a session of the UN General Assembly. Latin American delegates had their own candidate for the presidency, and were probably fairly uneasy about later stages of the conference, as they have already obtained what they really wanted—legitimacy for their 200-mile limits—and did not wish to see further discussions dilute that in any way. Although the second two weeks in Geneva were quite fruitful, there was undoubtedly a feeling that the wasted time had better be made up with a 'resumed' session (which allows Mr Amerasinghe to preside yet again), but a meeting following so soon seems to have stretched the resources of countries large and small, and there is some doubt on how much can be achieved.

Not every country will be satisfied by the 200-mile exclusive economic zone. On the one hand there are those with continental shelves that extend well beyond 200 miles, and they will be looking to this session for some clarification on this matter. On the other hand there are the disadvantaged nations for whom a 200-mile zone is meaningless—these include not just landlocked nations but countries such as the Netherlands. These nations are still looking for recognition of their disadvantage, maybe in the form of some income from

the exploitation of the shelves of more advantaged nations.

The question of authority over the deep-sea bed looks, if anything, still more difficult to resolve. There is wide agreement on the need for a sea-bed authority, which will not just take a hand in exploitation of deep-sea resources but will also probably have some role in research. The problem is how big the involvement should be. Many developing countries see a sea-bed authority as the first major step they can take towards making the West take the New International Economic Order seriously. The only sea-bed resource for the foreseeable future will be manganese nodules, and large-scale exploitation of them could have a dramatic effect on the world prices of manganese, cobalt and nickel. If the sea-bed authority is really in tune with the New International Economic Order, many nations will argue, it cannot allow commercial enterprises from rich parts of the world to go picking up nodules without any attention to the economic consequences in countries which depend on mining for their survival.

What will happen to scientific research under a sea-bed authority is just as problematical. A very large proportion of the work done quite openly by universities and research institutions on the sea bed can be construed in one way or another as resource-related, even if our present understanding of that part of the world is still very rudimentary. On the other hand there is plenty of military research conducted in the deep sea, some of it concerned with the sea-bed. No nation is going to allow itself to be forced to clear its military oceanography with an international authority, but the issue is not that simple as some military authorities, most notably the US Office of Naval Research, have been enlightened and liberal in their support of general oceanography; and this sponsorship might prove an embarrassment in future.

Developing countries would do well to use the sea-bed authority as a way to boost oceanographic expertise by asking, through it, for more educational and collaborative opportunities for their scientists, just as they will doubtless do as a condition for research being conducted in their economic zone. But they must be careful not to demand too much of the authority in the form of bureaucratic regulation and control of research, or the bright future that oceanography should have will rapidly be dimmed as young scientists, discouraged by news of tedious bureaucratic interference in research take their skills elsewhere. The authority must be used to raise research capabilities of all nations, not to suppress those that are already well advanced. □