

Governments and environmentalists split over forests

[LONDON] Sharp differences about the application of the United Nations (UN) biodiversity convention to forestry policy erupted between Latin American governments and environmentalist groups at a recent meeting of scientific experts from member countries of the convention.

At issue was whether the biodiversity convention should directly address the protection of biodiversity in forests, or be limited to providing advice to the separate UN Intergovernmental Panel on Forests, which regulates the commercial timber industry.

Environmentalist groups support direct intervention, as most biological diversity within forests lies in 'non-tree components', and the convention is more sympathetic than the panel to forestry conservation. But countries with large timber logging industries, particularly in Latin America, want the panel to take the lead role.

The declaration from the expert meeting, which took place in October, said that the biodiversity convention should be "consistent with" the panel's proposals for action. But one environmentalist at the meeting insists that "biodiversity should be given primary importance".

Environmentalists were also angry at being excluded from observing the drafting session. The chairman, Gabor Nechay from Hungary, took the unprecedented step of inviting environmentalist groups to help draft recommendations for governments. This contravenes UN rules, which say that only sovereign states can take part in drafting official documents.

The environmentalists' involvement was opposed by delegates from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Venezuela, who then succeeded in having the environmentalists excluded from the sessions altogether.

A UK member of an environmentalist group admits that the chairman overstepped his authority in allowing nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to participate in drafting recommendations.

But he says the Latin American group had no right to exclude environmentalists from observing. NGOs can normally attend 'closed' sessions if participating governments agree. Such agreement depends on the sensitivity of the issue being discussed.

The Latin American countries' decision to exclude environmentalists is, however, unlikely to set a precedent. The new chairman of all the experts' working groups, Abdul Hamid Zakri from Malaysia, is known as a supporter of NGO involvement in the UN process.

Ehsan Masood

Canadian inquiry calls for 'safety first' blood agency

[MONTREAL] A controversial four-year inquiry into the infection of thousands of Canadians with HIV and hepatitis C through blood products has called for a new national blood agency, run by an independent authority with a mandate to make safety a high priority.

One of the government's first responses has been to set up a Blood Safety Council, headed by a haematologist, to include scientists and representatives of consumer groups. Its tasks will include monitoring the implementation of the 50 recommendations of the commission that carried out the inquiry, headed by Mr Justice Horace Krever.

Among these recommendations is that the chief medical officer of the new blood agency, to be known as Canadian Blood Services, should report directly to its board. Medical scientists had previously complained that their input into decision-making was subordinate to that of administrators (see *Nature* 384, 602; 1996).

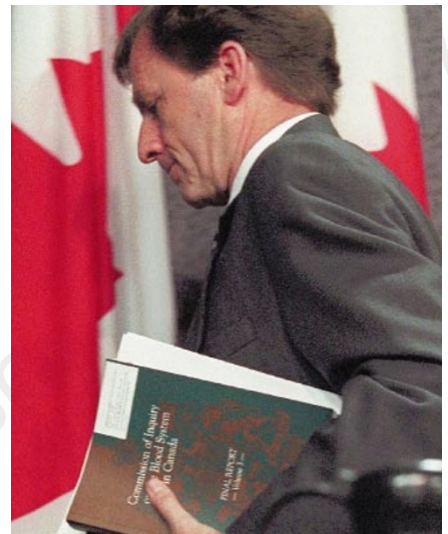
Provincial and federal governments had already begun to set up the new agency, which is expected to be in place by next September. Allan Rock, the federal health minister, said last week that Krever's more detailed recommendations would be taken into account in its design.

In making this move, the government appears to be back-tracking on earlier efforts to undermine the inquiry's conclusions. It had previously tried through court action to prevent Krever from blaming blood products for the infection of thousands of Canadians with HIV and hepatitis C (see *Nature* 379, 479; 1996).

The Canadian Blood Committee, one of the bodies charged with overseeing the blood supply, denied Krever access to potentially incriminating documents by destroying them in 1989. The government then set up its own task force to reform the blood system before Krever's report was presented.

Krever won an appeal to the Supreme Court that freed him to blame individuals but warned him to use language that would avoid litigation. Individuals are named in the report, with descriptions of actions Krever calls wrong or harmful. The Royal Canadian Mounted Police has announced a review to see if criminal charges are warranted.

Krever's report shows that the widely reported estimates of transfusion-related cases of AIDS (1,200) and hepatitis C (12,000) were far too low. It says that 85 per cent of hepatitis-C infections due to transfusions between 1986 and 1990 and 133 AIDS cases could have been avoided had available tests been used.



Rock: applying lessons of infected blood scandal following publication of inquiry report.

Krever suggests that the new service should continue to include provincial and territorial ministers, but not federal government, as its function as the safety regulator places it in a conflict of interest. The Red Cross will no longer be involved.

The separatist government of Quebec will not be a part of the new service, but instead will set up its own. But, according to Rock, Quebec's service will still be regulated for safety by the federal government.

Krever recommended that blood and blood products be paid for directly by hospitals, taking decision-making about needs away from politicians. He called for plans for a C\$300 million (US\$210 million) blood fractionation plant in Nova Scotia to be scrapped, but recommended that an amount equal to 10 per cent of the annual operating budget be allocated to research and development. The blood service should have its own research facilities, but should also collaborate with other organizations.

Krever also proposed a no-fault insurance system to compensate victims of contaminated blood. Since the 1980s 1,100 individuals infected with HIV in this way have received on average C\$30,000 a year, but those infected with hepatitis C have received nothing.

Following Krever's report, the government and the Red Cross have apologized to the victims of the blood tragedy. But the head of the Canadian Haemophilia Society, Durhane Wong-Rieger, expressed disappointment: "While the report is quite strong overall, we are disappointed that the level of responsibility and blame stops at the lower levels," she said.

David Spurgeon