Rio follow-up faces frustrated ambitions

[NEW YORK] When delegations from 200 countries met this week to survey progress in the five years since the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, they faced a situation of growing global disarray, with inaction on key issues and divisions between and among rich and poor nations.

The meeting, at the United Nations in New York, was dominated by public pressure on the United States to join Europe in setting dates and percentage targets for reducing emissions of greenhouse gases in advance of the meeting on this issue in Kyoto, Japan, in December.

Tony Blair, the new UK Prime Minister, said: "We in Europe have put our cards on the table. It is time for the special pleading to stop and for others to follow suit." Blair had just returned from a summit meeting in Denver at which US President Bill Clinton again refused to commit the United States to emissions targets.

At the 'Earth Summit+5' meeting, the UN's members were seeking to agree wording for a political statement and a longer "programme of outcomes" to meet the goals agreed at Rio. But the opening of the meeting was marked by a widespread recognition that implementation of these goals has so far been a spectacular failure.

Greenhouse gas emissions continue to grow, in defiance of a voluntary agreement between the developed countries to return them to 1990 levels by the year 2000. Deforestation, desertification and the depletion of fish stocks continue unabated.

The Global Environment Facility — the only major institution whose formation was

Blair: 'the special pleading must stop'.

pledged at Rio — remains far too small to make an impact on development in poor countries, and development aid from the rich countries has fallen sharply.

Ismail Razali, Malaysia's ambassador to the UN, who presided over the summit, opened it by describing the actions taken since Rio as "paltry". He said there was a "recession of spirit" afflicting the signatories to Agenda 21, the main document produced at Rio. "Damning statistics show that we are heading further away from, and not towards, sustainable development."

Non-governmental organizations echoed this acknowledgement of failure. "Five years on, we are extremely disappointed with what has happened on both the environmental and development sides," said Martin Khor, a Malaysian official of the Third World Network.

"The consensus that we had reached at the Earth Summit has fallen apart," says Barbara Bramble of the US National Wildlife Federation. "There is good reason for the South [developing countries] to be suspicious of all those pious statements you'll hear this week about the need to take action."

As criticism of US intransigence on greenhouse gas emissions mounted, there was little indication of irritation from officials in the Clinton administration, some of whom hope that international pressure will help to persuade the US public and the Congress that action is needed to reduce emissions.

The administration remains divided about how far to go at the Kyoto meeting — and constrained by powerful congressional opposition to cuts in emissions. Both houses of Congress would have to pass laws to implement cuts, and the Senate would have to endorse any international agreement.

Last week, for example, the international trade subcommittee of the Foreign Relations Committee in the Senate, chaired by Chuck Hagel (Republican, Nebraska), held hearings that made clear its opposition to mandatory emissions limits for the United States unless developing countries also face mandatory limits. The subcommittee called Senator Robert Byrd (Democrat, West Virginia) and Congressman John Dingell (Democrat, Michigan) as witnesses, to demonstrate that leading figures in both parties share this opposition.

Dingell and all the senators present — with the notable exception of John Kerry (Democrat, Massachusetts) — attacked mandatory limits. They referred repeatedly to the need for action by China which, they said, would surpass the United States as the world's largest emitter early next century.

More than 60 senators have signed a resolution, drafted by Byrd, that would rule out mandatory limits if they would damage the US economy — or if developing countries do not have them too.

European leaders, even as they press the Clinton administration to propose targets for emission reductions, acknowledge its predicament. "I don't think our problem is with the administration," said Robin Cook, the British foreign secretary. "It is the American public that cannot continue as it is" in its consumption of energy, he said.

But Wim Kok, Prime Minister of the Netherlands, which holds the presidency of the European Union, pointed out that many Americans support action, just as "not every European applauds fuel tax increases".

Kok said he understood that it could make sense for Clinton not to publish targets too long before the Kyoto meeting, to shorten the barrage of attack they will inevitably suffer in the United States. **Colin Macilwain**

India may set up genetics advisory panel

[NEW DELHI] Prompted by concern about the potential misuse of genetics research, Indian scientists are seeking the creation of a national bioethics panel to advise on the ethics of research and on the management and use of genetic information.

The proposal for such a panel, to monitor all aspects of research using human DNA and genetic testing, was made at a meeting of geneticists, social scientists, lawyers, economists and philosophers from India and abroad held recently in Goa.

The conference, the first of its kind in India, was organized by the Indian Academy of Sciences and was sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (Unesco), the United Nations University in Tokyo and the Third World Academy of Sciences in Trieste, Italy.

"While genetic studies may provide powerful tools for disease diagnosis and treatment, they are prone to abuses which could threaten society," says Prakash Tandon, president of the Indian academy. "It is therefore imperative that, as we consider developing genetic research in India, we also work in parallel on the ethical, legal and social implications."

Indian scientists have decided that, while following developments in gene therapy closely, they will hold back at present from experimenting with humans. India would also observe the international embargo on germ line therapy.

The government's Department of Biotechnology has agreed to do the groundwork for setting up the ethics panel. Consisting of individuals of "impeccable integrity and proven competence", the panel would lay down ethical guidelines for genetics research, advise policy-makers and safeguard the rights of human research subjects, says Manju Sharma, the department's secretary. The proposed panel would also develop Indian responses to issues such as patenting. K. S. Jayaraman