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Brazil Creates Massive Forest Reserve in Northern State of Para

by LADB Staff
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Brazil became home to the world's largest forest reserve as the government placed almost 100,000 sq km in a designated reserve area in December. A swath of Amazon rain forest the size of Alabama came under government protection in December in a region infamous for violent conflicts among loggers, ranchers, and environmentalists. Para state in the nation's north. Guyana Shield creates 7 protected areas in Amazon Known as the Guayana Shield, the 15,000 sq km area contains more than 25% of the world's remaining humid tropical forests and the largest remaining unpolluted freshwater reserves in the American tropics.

Creating a preservation corridor
The protected areas will link to existing reserves to form a vast preservation corridor eventually stretching into neighboring Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana. Conservation International put up US$1 million to facilitate the expansion, which preserves much of the jungle's largely untouched north.

Still, it is far from clear how much the new reserves will do to stall Amazon destruction, since most of the deforestation is taking place along the rain forest's southern border. "If any tropical rain forest on Earth remains intact a century from now, it will be this portion of northern Amazonia," Conservation International president Russell Mittermeier said. "The region has more undisturbed rain forest than anywhere else."

The Amazon region covers 60% of Brazil, and 20% of its forest-4.1 million sq km already has been destroyed by development, logging, and farming. In the past four years, an area larger than South Carolina has been cut down.

The protections announced in December are all the more surprising coming out of Para, a state the size of Bolivia, long known for ruthlessly cutting down the rain forest and where ranchers often gun down those who try to stop it.

The 2005 murder of American nun Dorothy Stang (see NotiSur, 2005-02-25) is only the most internationally notorious killing of forest defenders in the largely lawless jungle frontier. Stang, 73, of Dayton, Ohio, was shot dead in a dispute regarding a piece of land she wanted to preserve and local ranchers wanted cut down to raise cattle.

The new protected areas will help break the power of ranchers who often own plots of land the size of small European nations and rule them as their own personal fiefdoms, said Para state environment secretary Raul Porto in a televised interview. "Now there's no need for the plantation-type estate, which was our biggest problem."
Two of the new protected areas, covering 57,580 sq km, would place the land completely off limits to the general public and only be accessible to researchers. Together these two areas are believed to contain up to 54.1% of all bird, animal, and plant species found in the Amazon, Conservation International said. They also are home to several endangered animal species, including the northern bearded saki monkey, jaguars, giant anteaters, the giant armadillo, and the ariranha or giant Amazon otter.

The remaining areas have been declared sustainable-use protected areas, allowing local communities to manage the natural resources and permitting limited logging under strict management. The creation of the new reserves places about 55.4% of Para state either under some form of government protection or on an Indian reservation. "Together, the protected areas and indigenous lands of northern Para form one of the greatest biodiversity corridors of tropical forests in the planet," Conservation International said.

Sao Paulo newspaper Folha de Sao Paulo, calling the reserve the world's biggest, hailed the move as the final act of outgoing Gov. Simao Jatene, although the paper reported that he had been blocked by the courts from creating two other reserves in addition to the seven he designated. Still, the reserve encompasses at least 61 amphibious species, 200 mammal species, and 700 bird species, eight of which are endangered.

Enforcement questions in timber auctions

A key question facing the reserve and Brazil's dwindling forests are whether protection measures will be adequate. A Brazilian government plan set to go into effect this year will bring large-scale logging deep into the heart of the Amazon rain forest for the first time, in a calculated gamble that new monitoring efforts can offset any danger of increased devastation.

The New York Times reported that the government of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, in an attempt to create Brazil's first coherent, effective forest policy, would begin auctioning off timber rights to large tracts of the rain forest. The winning bidders would not have title to the land or the right to exploit resources other than timber, and the government says they will be closely monitored and will pay a royalty on their activities.

The architects of the plan say it will also help reduce tensions about land ownership in the Amazon, the world's largest tropical forest, which loses an area the size of New Jersey every year to clear-cutting and timbering. In theory, 70% of the jungle is public land, but miners, ranchers, and especially loggers have felt free to establish themselves in unpoliced areas, strip the land of valuable resources, and then move on, mostly in the "arc of destruction" on the eastern and southern fringes of the jungle (see NotiSur, 2006-02-17).

But the called-for monitoring of the loggers allowed into the rain forest's largely untouched center will come from a new, untested Forest Service with only 150 employees and from state and municipal governments. That concerns environmental and civic groups because local officials are more vulnerable to the pressures of powerful economic interests and to corruption.
Further, the new system assumes that the world community will also play a part and will buy timber only from merchants who are properly licensed and avoid unscrupulous dealers. The plan "can be a good idea in places where the situation is already chaotic," said Philip Fearnside, a researcher at the Instituto Nacional de Pesquisa da Amazonia (INPA) in Manaus who recently visited this remote area. "But it's a different story in areas where hardly any logging or deforestation has taken place, where you are actually going to be encouraging the introduction of predatory forces that don't exist there now."

On paper and in principle, said Stephan Schwartzman, an Amazon specialist at Environmental Defense in Washington, "I think everyone agrees that this system is an improvement over the current situation, which is totally out of control." But in the end, he added, "everything is going to depend on how it is done and whether the financial and human resources are there to make it work."

"They told us that we had to be the monitors ourselves, but we don't have the ability to do that," said Antonio Marfoni, a settler in the Amazonian settlement of Reality. "There's no working phone here, and we don't have the money or the time to be able to take the bus into town to denounce violations."

Last October, during the final debate of the presidential campaign (see NotiSur, 2006-11-03), opposition candidate Geraldo Alckmin called the plan "irresponsible," accused Lula of wanting to "privatize the Amazon," and added, "If today there is no supervision, imagine what will happen if you hand it over to the private sector."

The government says it intends to triple Brazil's agricultural output without felling a tree. Yet the influx of settlers and lack of government presence to enforce environmental protection measures may make reserve designations a reality only on paper. [Sources: The Guardian (UK), 07/17/06; BBC News, 06/06/06, 07/24/06; Inter Press Service, 11/11/05, 03/20/06, 03/14/06, 06/19/06, 07/25/06; The Independent (UK), 07/17/06, 07/26/06; The Miami Herald, 09/06/06; Bloomberg, 07/25/06, 09/15/06; ww.telesurte.net, 11/27/06; Associated Press, 01/25/06, 05/19/06, 05/28/06, 06/10/06, 07/25/06, 09/05/06, 12/04/06; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 12/04/06; Folha de Sao Paulo, 12/05/06; The New York Times, 12/11/05, 01/14/07]