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Brazil's Outspoken Environment Minister Marina Silva Tenders Resignation

by LADB Staff
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Brazil's minister of the environment, Marina Silva, handed her resignation in to President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva in May. Observers of Brazilian affairs attributed her decision to pressures from other ministries, which prevented her from fulfilling her duties as the government's chief protector of the environment.

Outgoing minister Silva was replaced by Carlos Minc, a long-time environmental activist and one of the founders of the Partido Verde. Several analysts question whether the Environment Ministry will be able to carry out its ecological duties as economic development takes a central role in the Lula administration.

Silva, a staunch defender of the Amazon rainforest, wrote in her resignation letter to President Lula that the move was "personal and irrevocable." She also referred to difficulties she had faced "for some time" in implementing the government's environmental agenda.

Environmentalists lament resignation

Environmental campaigners said her resignation was a major setback for the rainforest in Brazil. "Brazil is losing the only voice in the government that spoke out for the environment," said Sergio Leitao, director of public policy for Greenpeace in Brazil. "The minister is leaving because the pressure on her for taking the measures she took against deforestation has become unbearable," he added.

Silva has blamed the increasing deforestation of the Amazon on Brazilian cattle ranchers and farmers. She had unsuccessfully opposed several government infrastructure projects in the Amazon rainforest, including two big hydroelectric dams on the River Madeira (see NotiSur, 2008-05-23), and a major new road.

According to Brazilian media reports, she was also believed to be dismayed at the recent appointment of another minister to act as a coordinator for the government's newly announced strategy for the Amazon. The government's decision to authorize genetically modified grains, and the construction of a new nuclear power plant, also went against the minister's environmental concerns.

Silva's resignation will reinforce a perception that Lula is more concerned with economic development than conservation. "The environmental area was relegated to no priority," said Denise Hamu, secretary general of WWF in Brazil. "She got tired of the thankless struggle."
Others, however, have welcomed her decision to step down. "I hope the next minister is not as radical as Marina," said Rui Prado, head of the agriculture federation of Mato Grosso, a big farming state. The child of rubber-tappers from the Amazonian state of Acre, Silva was illiterate until the age of 14. She worked with the rainforest activist Chico Mendes, who was murdered nearly 20 years ago (see NotiSur, 1993-02-23 and 1996-08-02), and she was appointed environment minister when Lula won the presidency in 2002.

Newspaper Folha de Sao Paulo pointed out that she was among a handful of ministers who still remained from the first days of the Lula administration. Her positions antagonized pro-development ministers within the current government as they sought to boost Brazil's economic growth with agricultural commodities often cultivated in cleared jungle.

Speculation arose that Lula wanted to fire her but feared she would gain martyr status as an environmentalist. Although she said she lacked the necessary political support to protect the Amazon, she did not elaborate and did not blame Lula in the excerpts of her resignation letter that were published by the government's official Agencia Brasil news service. She said she would leave office and go back to her post in Brazil's Senate to rebuild political support and push for Brazilian environmental causes.

The president's appointment of Marina Silva after he was elected in 2002 brought a universally renowned environmental star into his Cabinet. Her resignation ended a stormy six-year term during which she often clashed with Brazilian interests lobbying for development in the Amazon rain forest. Lula: rich nations hypocritical about environment Minc took over on May 20, saying he wants to maintain the priorities of his predecessor.

At Minc's swearing-in ceremony, Lula delivered a speech that accused rich nations of hypocrisy over the Amazon and global warming. But observers say he faces many competing interests, with pressure to provide economic opportunities for the Amazon region's 25 million people. BBC regional analyst James Painter says Minc has the right credentials, but the incoming minister admits he is not an expert on the Amazon at a time when international attention is focusing on the region and the critical role it plays in the world's climate.

Minc is a professor of geography and a won a UN prize in 1989 for being one of the world's 500 notable green campaigners. He was also the environment secretary in the state of Rio de Janeiro. Lula used the swearing-in speech to lash developed nations for alleged hypocrisy on environmental policy. "They want to discuss the question of global warming but don't talk about cutting down the forest in their countries. They don't want to talk about reducing consumption because they think that we Brazilians have to do what they don't do," Lula said.

Lula praised outgoing minister Silva but took pains to stress that the Brazil's environmental policies were not linked to a single minister. "Minc, act as if you're taking the place of Pele," Silva told the incoming minister, referring to Brazil's former soccer superstar. "It's important to remember Pele wasn't irreplaceable."
Minc had previously announced that the government would release numbers on showing Amazon deforestation was on the upswing. That release was postponed reportedly over political infighting between Minc and the governor of Mato Grosso state Blairo Maggi, who is also a major soybean producer. Soybeans, along with cattle and logging, are one of the main forces driving deforestation in the Amazon. Marcelo Furtado, coordinator of Greenpeace's Brazil campaign, said the infighting "reflects the ambiguity in Lula's government."

Minc is under pressure from environmentalists to ensure the conservation of the rainforest is given due consideration at a time when the Brazilian government is following an ambitious economic agenda, based in part on a boom in commodity exports. Minc's May 27 statement reported in Folha de Sao Paulo reflected the contradictory pressures he is under, saying his department needed to grant environmental licenses to developers. "We need to give licenses more efficiently and with more rigor," said Minc.

Minc says he wants a bigger budget and the ability to use the army to protect Brazil's national reserves. But Lula has already been ruled that out. Increased protection efforts went into effect after the murder of US nun Dorothy Stang in 2005 (see NotiSur, 2005-02-25) and the Lula government created a massive reserve in the state of Para (see NotiSur, 2007-01-19). But some studies have shown big increases in deforestation (see NotiSur, 2006-02-17 and 2007-03-23).

Critics point to extremely spotty enforcement of Amazon-protection laws, which, on paper, are among the most stringent environmental protection laws in the world. Minc's appointment also coincides with irritation in Brazil over comments suggesting the protection of the Amazon rainforest is too important to be left only to the Brazilian authorities.

Lula stressed that there could be no question about his country's sovereignty over the region. "The Amazon has an owner and that owner is the Brazilian people," he said. The congressional right has introduced legislation that would require all foreign visitors to the Amazon to get permission to visit.

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