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World Social Forum Examines Environmental Changes in Amazon

by LADB Staff

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For years, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has participated in the World Economic Forum (WEF), held each year in the Swiss winter resort of Davos, where the world's economic elite debate, and perhaps define, the course of globalization. In 2009, however, while the world was debating, disconcerted, what it needed to do regarding the economic crisis affecting the entire international community, President Lula preferred to stay in Brazil to attend the World Social Forum (WSF), held Jan. 27-Feb. 1 in the hot, tropical city of Belem in the heart of the Brazilian Amazon.

On Jan. 29, Lula appeared with the polemical Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, and Presidents Evo Morales of Bolivia, Rafael Correa of Ecuador, and Fernando Lugo of Paraguay. The presence of Lula and the other presidents was a clear sign that the WSF had brought the Amazon's importance to the international scene, since reducing deforestation in the immense rain forest is among the principal strategies in the effort to combat global warming.

For the 90,000 people from more than 150 countries, the WSF was an opportunity to get an ample picture of what is happening in the Amazon, which still encompasses 2.6 million sq km. The Amazon is always at the center of the world environmental agenda, among other reasons, because it is one of the largest river basins on the planet, giving Brazil 12.5% of the world's fresh-water reserves.

Deforestation tops discussions

Deforestation, which has destroyed approximately 18% of the old-growth forest, or more than 500,000 sq km, was, naturally, one of the most discussed issues. Amazon deforestation is now responsible for around 70% of the greenhouse-gas emissions in Brazil which is among the 10 largest emitters in general equivalent to 1 billion tons of carbon dioxide (CO₂). Zero deforestation by 2015, proposed by Greenpeace, is considered crucial for reducing these emissions.

Compensated reduction as a solution Brazil's scientific community is also committed to reducing deforestation. One of the proposals circulating among the scientific community is the compensated reduction (CR) of deforestation. The reduction would be compensated based on objectives approved by the country receiving compensation. Carlos Nobre of the Centro de Previsao de Tempo e Estudos Climaticos of the Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciais (CPTEC/INPE) is a CR proponent. In a conference sponsored by CPFL Energia,

Nobre urged a concerted effort to reduce Amazon deforestation with the opportunity to compensate the reduction. Brazil and Indonesia have the same rate of deforestation of their tropical forests, said Nobre.

Emissions from deforestation just in Brazil and Indonesia, with the same amount on average annually, would offset 80% of the emission reduction gained under the Kyoto Protocol, if Annex I countries fulfilled the objective of an average reduction of 5.2% between 2008 and 2012. The planet would have much to gain, in reducing greenhouse-gas emissions, if Brazil and Indonesia could develop effective policies to reduce deforestation. "The great end of the Brazilian equation necessarily has to come from reducing Amazon deforestation," Nobre said. In this case the reduction can be compensated with an efficient, complete mechanism.

Compensated reduction is a proposal to compensate financially those developing countries that are making great efforts to reduce deforestation. Public policies would determine the indemnization to be put in practice, with the participation of various social sectors, regarding previously established quantitative objectives. "It is evident that these resources cannot be used to reduce the surplus and pay the debt but need to be applied to conservation and sustainable-development activities," said Nobre, who holds a PhD in climatology from MIT.

Between August 2005 and August 2006, Amazon deforestation dropped 30%, close to the 2004-2005 achievement of a 31% reduction. Estimated deforestation between August 2005 and August 2006 was 13,100 sq km, compared with 27,400 sq km between 2003 and 2004, one of the highest levels ever registered.

From 1997 to 1988, 21,000 sq km were deforested. From 1988 to 1990, the figure was 31,500 sq km; from 1990 to 1994, 39,700 sq km; from 1994 to 1998, during the first term of former President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, deforestation claimed 77,800 sq km. From 1998 to 2008, during Cardoso's second term, 76,900 sq km were lost. From 2002/3 to 2005/6, during Lula's first term, the toll was 84,400 sq km. (All figures are from INPE.) Since the 2004-2006 reduction, deforestation has begun to climb again.

In August 2008, deforestation was 756 sq km, a 134% jump from July (323 sq km). To reduce and for many, such as the majority of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), to arrive at zero deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon is crucial for contributing to efforts against global warming. This point was repeated many times at the WSF partly because the Amazon has so much to lose from global warming.

A study coordinated by Carlos Nobre points to a savannization tendency in the Amazon, if the incidence of extreme climate change is confirmed. The study has been carried out by Nobre with his doctoral students and considers six climate models (US, English, German, Canadian, Australian, and Japanese) to determine possible scenarios of climate change and their impact on 12 kinds of world biomass.

With the uncertainties typical of forecast models, a temperature variation of between 3 degrees and 6 degrees in the coming decades was considered. The risk of savannization increases at the levels in which the scenarios are most pessimistic. At the end of the 21st century, savannization may affect 30% of the Amazon, with the eastern area most affected. Causes of deforestation Amazon deforestation is caused by three main factors: illegal logging, expansion of the agricultural frontier, especially with the planting of soy, and promoting cattle raising in the region. Between 1990 and

2003, the number of cattle increased 140% in the Amazon. In 2004, there were 71 million head of cattle in the region and 20 million people.

Brazilian government strategies for combating Amazon deforestation are considered insufficient by environmentalists, as was said repeatedly at the World Social Forum. The state of Para, where the forum was held, was also the state with the greatest deforestation in August 2008 (435 sq km), followed by Mato Grosso (229 sq km), but satellite capture of deforestation is limited to areas without cloud cover.

Violence in Amazon also a concern

The WSF was concerned not just with environmental issues in the Amazon. Violence against landless workers, indigenous peoples, rubber tappers, residents of quilombos (areas where descendents of former slaves live), and other inhabitants in the vast area of the Amazon was much discussed at Belem, capital of Para, which has had the largest number of assassinations of rural workers in Brazil.

"Agroindustry is most responsible for the great destruction of the Amazon and continues costing lives. What is the limit of the greed?" asked emeritus Bishop Pedro Casaldaliga, who, for 33 years was prelate of Sao Felix da Araguaia in Mato Grosso and is one of the most distinguished defenders of residents of the Amazon.

A study by the Comissao Pastoral da Terra (CPT), an agency of the Conferencia Nacional dos Bispos do Brazil (CNBB), said that, from 1971 to 2004, 772 rural workers and human rights advocates were assassinated in Para. Victims included 73-year-old US missionary Sr. Dorothy Stang, who was shot to death Feb. 12, 2005, in an incident that has had enormous impact both in Brazil and internationally (see NotiSur, 2005-02-25, 2007-05-25, 2008-06-06). She was killed at 7:30 in the morning, as she walked along a dirt road 53 km from the town of Anapu in Para. Most of the dead in Para, Amazonas, and other states are rural workers dedicated to the struggle for agrarian reform.

And the government of President Lula, who was elected on the ticket of the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) and who has always identified with the struggle of the campesinos, has been criticized for its slow application of agrarian reform. Indigenous and land in the rain forest The situation of the indigenous peoples in the Amazon is also a problem, and it was expected that it would surface at Belem.

In the Amazon, there are 163 indigenous groups, with 270,000 people, approximately 80% of Brazil's indigenous population. The peoples of the rain forest, says the CNBB, require swifter action by the government to legalize indigenous lands, guaranteed by the 1988 Constitution but never fully implemented in practice. Registering the demarcation with the Departamento do Patrimonio da Uniao (DPU) and the Cartorio de Registro de Imoveis of the respective municipios has been finished for about half the 504 indigenous land tracts in the Amazon.

While the process to complete this procedure drags on, situations of conflict such as that in the Raposa Serra do Sol reserve in Roraima will continue. "It is to change the situation of violence that people such as Sr. Dorothy are giving, like the generous land, their lives," said Ana Perugini, PT

legislator in the state of Sao Paulo. Although her district is thousands of miles from the Amazon, she supports the struggle of campesinos in the region. A park named after Dorothy Stang was inaugurated in the city of Hortolandia, in the interior of Sao Paulo, Perugini's home. "Justice for Sr. Dorothy, justice for all the dead in the countryside, the dead in the rain forest so full of life," she said.

A few days before the World Social Forum, the Conselho Indigenista Missionario (CIMI), also an agency of the CNBB, presented preliminary data from a report on violence against indigenous peoples in 2008. At least 53 indigenous people were murdered in nine Brazilian states, compared with 92 killed in 2007.

On Jan. 31, 2009, Brazil's indigenous leaders submitted their demands directly to Minister of Justice Tarso Genro at the WSF. Demarcation of all Indian lands and a proposal for no deforestation and no construction of hydroelectric dams in the Amazon were among the principal demands expressed by the leaders during the public ceremony, organized by the Coordenacao das Organizacoes Indigenas da Amazonia Brasileira (COIAB). The minister said the Lula government is making every effort to meet their demands and respect the rights of indigenous people, adding, "In two years, 271 land demarcation decrees were signed, 10 are approved, and around 90 are in process."

Large hydroelectric projects have negative impact

The impact of large-scale hydroelectric projects on the peoples of the Amazon and on indigenous areas has been another important concern. One case in particular is the Complexo Hidrologico do Rio Madeira in the state of Rondonia, which includes the Santo Antonio and Jirau plants. COIAB has warned of the impact of hydroelectric energy on the 11 indigenous groups who live on the banks of the Rio Madeira, among them two isolated communities that have almost no contact with "civilization."

Investigators such as Professor Oswaldo Seva of the Universidade Estadual de Campinas (UNICAMP) have warned that, besides the social and cultural impact, the hydroelectric plants planned for the Rio Madeira have high economic costs and risks related with their operation. The high transportation cost, in all of Brazil, for energy produced in the Amazon is one factor identified by Seva, who also cites the unreliability of hydroelectric operations in the region.

Mobilizations around issues related to the Amazon, by different social movements, such as the indigenous peoples, are going to continue, and the next important event will be the Encontro Sem Fronteiras among groups and communities from French Guiana, Peru, Bolivia, Venezuela, Colombia, and Brazil, on July 15, 2009, in Belem. For now, among the social movements, NGOs, and peoples of the Amazon, the region will continue being the main point on the agenda.

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