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Brazil Launches Program To Halt Devastation Of Amazon Rain Forest

by John Neagle

Category/Department: General

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On Oct. 12, Brazilian President Jose Sarney announced a plan to slow down the destruction of the Amazon rain forest, effectively reversing a policy introduced almost two decades ago. The president said the government had decided to suspend tax breaks and other public incentives for development projects considered harmful to the environment. Sarney made the announcement during a televised address in the presence of several ministers. The "red light" that awakened him, Sarney said, was a report by Brazilian scientists that they had found more than 6,000 man-made fires in the Amazon in a single day. Cattle raising, according to Sarney, would be strictly forbidden in the Amazon region and prohibited in the dwindling Atlantic forest. Exports of unprocessed tropical timber are banned. The president also stated that his government would henceforth strengthen existing environmental agencies. Farm and ranch operations widely held to be unprofitable without official subsidies have been the single largest cause of destruction of tens of thousands of acres of virgin rain forest. Other government-sponsored development projects, such as roads, dams and mines, have destroyed large swaths of the jungle, while attracting hundreds of thousands of settlers to the region. The Atlantic rain forest, which once ran in a wide band across the coast of Brazil, has been reduced to only 3% of its original area of an estimated 140,000 square miles. Sarney said he had ordered studies to determine areas of the Amazon Basin and elsewhere that must be preserved, and those which could be used for agriculture or cattle. Since 1980, at least 77,000 square miles of land in the Amazon region have been cleared by the slash-and-burn method. Environmental organizations argue that such practices have released hundreds of tons of noxious gases and particulate matter into the atmosphere and contributed to the "greenhouse effect," i.e., the gradual warming of the atmosphere by a concentration of pollutants which trap the sun's warmth. (Basic data from several sources, including New York Times, 10/14/88)

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