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Barbara Khol

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Brazil: President Fires Environment Secretary

by Barbara Khol

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On March 21, President Fernando Collor de Mello fired Environment Secretary Jose Lutzenberger. Education Minister Jose Gutenberg was appointed to serve as interim secretary. During a UN meeting in New York Lutzenberger questioned the wisdom of giving Brazil \$1.5 billion for environmental projects. The grant had been discussed at a meeting of the G-7 industrialized nations in Houston last year. According to the secretary, "It could wind up in the hands of the corrupt." In a televised interview on March 18, Lutzenberger said the Brazilian Environment Institute (Instituto Brasileiro de Meio Ambiente-IBAMA) was rife with corruption. He added that IBAMA "operates as a branch office of the logging companies." The secretary's statements were denied by IBAMA officials who threatened to quit en masse unless Lutzenberger was fired. IBAMA president Eduardo Martins was also removed by President Collor de Mello. In 1990, the outspoken environmentalist was named to head newly created Secretariat. During his tenure in the office, Lutzenberger attacked Brazil's "enslavement" by foreign automakers, and called the commanding general of the Amazon region a "jerk." Prior to founding Brazil's first environmental protection group in the 1970s, Lutzenberger quit his job at the BASF chemical company. He fought for rigorous pesticide control laws and anti-pollution filters at a cellulose plant in his native Rio Grande do Sul state. Later he founded his own environmental consulting firm. Lutzenberger received many awards for his ecological defense work. Goldemberg appointed agronomist and biologist Maria Tereza Jorge Padua head of IBAMA on March 23. On the same day in New York, delegates of Brazilian non-governmental organizations attending preparatory talks leading up to the UN Conference on Environment and Development (scheduled for June in Rio de Janeiro) told the Inter Press Service that Lutzenberger's dismissal was not a surprise. According to delegate Rubens Born, the dismissal "makes the government's position on environmental matters much clearer." He added that Lutzenberger's "progressive" stance conflicted with official government policy. Born said, "Collor de Mello has no social base, so he is desperately trying to form alliances with right-wingers in Congress, who obviously do not respond to the environmental interests that Lutzenberger espoused." Another NGO representative, Luis Merico, said, "The distance between the government and Lutzenberger was all too evident...The Foreign Ministry and the Strategic Affairs Department were the ones that formulated environmental policy, not Lutzenberger." NGO representative Telma Castello Branco said, "Lutzenberger was failing despite his good proposals. Due to his lack of political vision, he was unable to obtain backing from either the NGOs or the government." According to Carlos Aveline, another delegate, "Lutzenberger's departure demonstrates that the government has an anti-ecological policy. Brazil is witnessing an incredible wave of corruption. I hope the new environment secretary will be sufficiently intelligent to avoid being overwhelmed by the forces of administrative chaos operating within the federal government." [Basic data from Spanish news service EFE, 03/21/92; Inter Press Service, 03/23/92; O Estado de Sao Paulo, Gazeta Mercantil (Brazil), 03/24/92; Associated Press, 03/30/92]

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