



CEDI - P. I. B.  
 DATA 31 / 12 / 86  
 COD EFD 00003

"We are building a highway for US Steel"—  
 Senator Erminio Moraes (Pernambuco, Brazil)

Peace News 5 January 1973

# BRAZIL: The Great Highway Robbery

According to your life-style and expectations, the Trans Amazonian Highway epitomises all that is best, or worst, in contemporary exploitation of our planet. Amazonia is a region which might conceivably hold more mineral deposits than the rest of the world put together; undoubtedly the world's greatest source of timber and, for American futurist Herman Kahn, potentially the largest reservoir ever known to man.

It is hardly surprising that the Brazilian government has effectively leased the area to the United States, for the Medici regime which came to power in 1969 represented the pro-American faction in the 1964 dictatorship; the discredited General Albuquerque Lima represented the "nationalists". Nor is it surprising that Amazonia's only indigenous inhabitants (some 5,000 Indians close to the road, and an unknown number further afield) are being killed off. "The Indians must not be sidelined. They must enter the mainstream of Brazilian life", General Oscar Jeronymo Bandeira de Mello, director of FUNAI\* told Loren MacIntyre. "To do so with dignity they must learn how to work!" (*National Geographic Magazine*, October 1972). 80 Brazilian anthropologists have already condemned this so-called "civilised" work system and one of them, a FUNAI worker, resigned last year, as "I don't want to go on being a grave-digger for Indians". At the present moment, the Indian Rural Guard, set up by the military police, seems to be the main tribal extinction agency. "Rebels" are sent to a penal colony and "re-educated" to be good Indians.

It would be astonishing if any natural Indians were left by 1978. (Considering the present methods used by the Brazilian regime to stifle political opposition, it would be surprising if any opponents to "national occupation" were left too.)

However, fascist regimes habitually display contradictory attitudes to outside intervention. Even as the Trans-Amazonian Highway was launched, a reputedly pro-American Senator called Tavora declared that it should not constitute a "prior objective" of national

policy. To claims that the project would absorb excess labour from the slum-ridden North-East, fill up the "empty spaces", and exploit the mineral riches, Tavora asserted that: "mechanisation would soon supercede manual labour; the new agricultural colonies would be cut off from centres of consumption; mineral exploration could be adequately done by airplane—and the metals transported by air and river".

If Tavora is right, what is Garrastazu Medici up to? On the one hand, his regime is obviously despatching the Indian problem once and for all—and conveniently using the "poverty" of the north-east as a blind for doing so. On the other hand, he is allowing the large intensive land-owners—men from Rio and Sao Paulo, who clasp the golden fingers of US businessmen—to supercede the extensive, *latifundist* land-holders. The ploy not only defuses the north-eastern peasant movement (driven underground ten years ago) by evacuating thousands of peasants and favela dwellers and dumping them in the jungle. It also under-cuts those land-owners who, under Varga's "benevolent dictatorship", were beginning to concede some rights to peasant-farmers, in preference to surrendering to north American capital and the Pentagon.

The Medici regime is not stupid. It has turned the contradictions endemic to fascism into compelling propaganda for its own people and the foreign plunderers. It has attacked liberal Americans who fear that destruction of the Amazonian forest might rob the world of half its oxygen supplies for "thinking of developing nations as playgrounds or forest reserves. In a single blow they would stop the world at the point it is now, keeping themselves in front and keeping the rest of the world as suppliers of raw materials and as vacation land for worn-out, advanced countries" (*Jornal do Brasil*).

It has, perhaps unwittingly, placed the onus for revolution on the shoulders of us in the technologised west. And—certainly unintentionally—it has made clear that the revolution, when it comes in Brazil, must take a very different path from that of Peru, which merely confirmed the destruction of habitat and Indians started four hundred years before.

1967. General Albuquerque Lima (Minister of the Interior) promises his countrymen "effective military occupation" of Brazil's hinterland.

SUDAM—a national agency for the development of Amazonas, is set up.

1970, October. The Trans-Amazonian Highway project begins. Government occupation to be effective 60 miles on either side of the road, which will stretch from Brazil's north-east coast 3,350 miles to the Peruvian border.

INCRA—a government agency is set up to colonise the newly-opened lands. Half a million new settlers—mostly from the slums of the north-east—are to be brought into the region before 1978, given 250 acres of forest land per family and a survival allowance of \$28 a month.

By 1972, there are 11,000 workers on the Trans-Amazonian Highway. Other highways are laid, intended to be part of 9,000 mile network. They include the Xavantina-Cachimbo road which cuts through the Xingu National Park—that "inviolable refuge for the Indians" founded by the Villas-Boas brothers.

Estimated number of Indians directly along the Trans-Amazonian line: 13 tribes with 5,000 members.

Estimated cost of project: \$100 million—at the least.

Income to Brazil for the Highway: from United Nations Development Programme in May 1972—\$89 million loan.

International exploiters (a partial list)  
 US Steel Company (who have located possibly the "world's largest iron ore reserves" in the Xingu area) Alcoa (US, mining bauxite), Bethlehem Steel (mining manganese), WR Grace and Co (US, mining tin).

Georgia Pacific (US) and Bruynzeel (Holland)—timber operations (estimated 16% of world's timber lies in Amazonas) George Pacific already owns 600,000 acres near the new highway.

La Companhia Agropecuariado Para (49.8% of shares in hands of King's Ranch, 24.9% Armour Swift 24.9%—all US companies) owns at least 280,000 square kilometres and promises that Amazonia will become "one of the greatest centres for the exportation of meat, in the world".

Daniel Keith Ludwig, 76-year-old American recluse who is creating 2.5 million acres to plant rice paddy (sic).

\*The National Indian Foundation, which in 1968 replaced the genocidal Service for the Protection of the Indians (SPI).