

## Brazil

# A back door into the Amazon

FROM OUR WASHINGTON CORRESPONDENT

THREE American senators made a disturbing discovery in the Amazon rain forest last month. They found preparations for a paved road to be built from the western Brazilian province of Acre to Pucallpa in Peru and thence over the Andes to Lima. The bulldozers are ready to start as soon as the dry season opens in April. Who, asked the senators (Tim Wirth, Albert Gore and John Heinz), is to pay for this road, which will open a back door into the Amazon? Japanese banks, came the reply.



Stop it, say the Americans

The governor of Acre, which is where the left-wing trade unionist Chico Mendes was murdered in December for resisting development of the Amazon, had just returned from a visit to Tokyo to seal the contracts. He proudly showed the senators a map showing the road's significance. The section in Brazil would be quite short, through a district with no road at all, to connect with the long trans-Andean highway in Peru. It would allow the export of Brazil nuts; timber and other products to Japan, the short way, via Lima.

Dr Tom Lovejoy of Washington's Smithsonian Institution, who was with the senators, believes the road would be "the beginning of the end" for the Amazon. This is not just because roads bring land-hungry settlers who burn the trees but because, almost for the first time, it would open the



western Amazon to commerce.

Japan takes 40% of all the tropical logs sold on the world market. Its main suppliers have been south-east Asian nations. Indonesia and Malaysia have banned the export of logs, planning to capture more of their value by sawing them into timber at home. So Japanese industry is looking for alternative sources. The back door of the Amazon is temptingly close. Until now less than 5% of the damage done to the Amazon has been done by logging.

The World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank both refused to pay for the Acre-to-Peru road, under their new policy of not helping projects that damage the rain forest. They have begun to recognise that replacing rain forest with pasture land reduces its value to people as well as to creatures. One study in Peru found that the value of the products of a natural forest exploited sustainably for its fruit, rubber and timber exceeded threefold the value of beef that the land could produce as pasture.

Senators Wirth and Gore, in a meeting with Mr Yoshiro Mori, a member of the Japanese parliament with an interest in Brazil, urged his country to insist on applying similar standards to its loans abroad. They also took their protest to the Japanese ambassador in Washington. But the Japanese are being urged to lend more to the third world, and the Brazilians are being urged to attract foreign investment and pay off their debts. Both think the Americans should keep their noses out. Japan's ties to Brazil go deeper than aid. A million people of Japanese origin live around Sao Paulo. Japan's growing wealth and Brazil's potential for development make them natural partners.

The Americans are worried that Japanese initiatives that are not linked to protection of the environment will defuse the otherwise increasingly united pressure from developed nations for Brazil to take green worries seriously. The swapping of debt for "nature", meaning the release of local currency for conservation at home together with the cancellation of debt abroad, has been successful in Costa Rica and a few other tiny countries. Western politicians have suggested something larger for Brazil, which owes \$115 billion to western banks.

Brazil faces an election in November;

none of its politicians—and none of its generals—wants to be seen bowing to pressure from the United States. When Mr Roberto Abreu Sodre, the foreign minister, met the three senators, he was polite about their concern. Brazilians are usually polite, but are not always listening.