

# Povos Indígenas no Brasil

Fonte The Economist Class.: Chico Mendes

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## A murder in the forest

FROM OUR BRAZIL CORRESPONDENT

**I**N EVERY dry season since the mid-1970s, great tracts of the Amazon have been torched by Brazilian farmers and settlers pushing back the frontiers of the world's largest rain forest. Every year ecologists cringe at the loss of rare species, and anthropologists fret about the fate of the region's dwindling Indian population. To these critics the Brazilian government has had a standard reply: the Amazon is the property of Brazil and it is the right of Brazil alone to decide what to do with it.

Nowadays, thanks to spreading ecological literacy, the critics are claiming rights of their own. Deforestation in Brazil contributes to the "greenhouse effect", which heats up the whole planet and not just the Brazilian bit of it. As a result, last year's Amazon fires, which followed a drought in the American Midwest, prompted indignant international headlines. Soft loans from the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank for new roads and hydroelectric dams were suspended pending further study of Brazil's treatment of the environment.

For all that, it has taken a murder to make the Brazilian government realise how interested the outsiders are. On December 23rd a peasant organiser and ecologist, Francisco ("Chico") Mendes, was shot dead outside his home in Xapuri (see map). In ordinary circumstances his murder would have attracted as little attention as the 250 or so unresolved killings of peasants and squatters that take place every year in the disputed Amazonian fron-



tier lands. Although most of the killings are blamed on gunmen hired by local landowners, arrests are rare. In these jungle regions, jungle law prevails.

Mr Mendes, however, had won accolades abroad for his fight to protect the western frontier state of Acre against the deforestation which, among other things, was destroying the livelihood of freelance rubber tappers like himself. Time and again his union succeeded in blocking the incursions of lumber gangs. On each occasion death threats against Mr Mendes followed. His murder has quickly become a symbol of the battle to save the Amazon that is being lost.

To control the damage, the government dispatched the chief of federal police to Acre to lead the investigation. Before his death Mr Mendes had accused two landowning brothers of planning to murder him. They are now on the run; four of their relatives have been placed

under arrest. One has confessed.

The reaction outside Brazil to last year's fires persuaded President José Sarney to suspend the tax holidays and subsidised loans enjoyed by some of the development projects that are eating into the Amazon. But the federal government's power to halt deforestation and freelance prospecting in the vast Amazon basin is minimal. Fat bribes persuade many officials to turn a blind eye. The forests' official guardian, the Forestry Institute, is chronically under-staffed.

Until now, the most sensitive political issue has been the plight of Brazil's 220,000 Indians, whose lands are being invaded and rivers polluted by settlers and gold prospectors. The trans-Amazonian highway built in the early 1970s failed to draw destitute peasants from the arid north-east into the heart of the Amazon. But the BR364 highway, which runs north-west from Cuiaba, has carried hundreds of thousands of migrants into Rondonia and Acre. Huge mining projects, hydroelectric dams and cattle ranches have also opened up the central state of Para.

Dozens of small groups that want to protect the countryside, even a "green" party, have been founded in Brazil in recent years. They have had little impact. One reason is that the armed forces, which ruled Brazil for 21 years until 1985, proclaimed that settling the Amazon was a national security objective. Recently the army has begun building outposts along the country's northern border in the hope of attracting new settlements. The protesters may go blue in the face, but it will take a more determined president than Mr Sarney to change the army's mind.