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L.A. on the Amazon

Filmmakers Bid for Chico Mendes' Story

By Richard House
Special to The Washington Post

RIO BRANCO, Brazil—Into the remote rubber groves of Amazonia has come the thunder of Hollywood as rival producers vie for the right to film the life of Chico Mendes, the Brazilian ecologist who was murdered near here late last year.

The Mendes story is a microcosm of the struggle to save the Amazonian rain forest. It weaves together conservation, tribal peoples and the persecution of minorities—all themes that have spelled success for a string of recent box office hits.

Mendes' upbringing in the forest, his political education at the hands of a Marxist fugitive, and the pacifist ecological protests that brought him international recognition should provide rich material for a movie.

So too should his killing, said to have been planned by a clan of farmers, and its aftermath: what some believe has been the government's reluctance to conclude a police investigation that could implicate some of the state's most powerful figures.

So while rural trade union leaders held a congress here last week to push ahead with the Mendes dream of an "alliance of forest peoples" that would unite rubber tappers and Indian tribes, producers' agents moved into the town's two bearable hotels.

As the tappers told of confrontations with hired gunmen and of the economic system that keeps them in the forest with annual incomes of less than \$1,200, film representatives showed videos of recent productions in their air-conditioned rooms. One took over the local cin-



CHICO MENDES

ema for a private screening aimed at winning over the rubber tappers.

The object of all these attentions is Ilsamar Mendes, now under siege to sell the rights to her late husband's still-unwritten story. And the bars of Rio Branco hummed with movie gossip as seven rival proposals took shape.

Warner Bros., 20th Century Fox, Paramount and Turner Broadcasting have all declared an interest. So too has Robert Redford, who together with Brazilian actress Sonia Braga met with Mendes' widow when she recently received an award in Washington, D.C. Braga

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The Mendes Film

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(who had a role in the Redford-directed "Milagro Beanfield War") is said to be interested in the widow's part.

Fox has retained Alex Shoumatoff, author of a Vanity Fair article about Mendes. A local newspaper reported that the representative of Ted Turner's Better World Society, which gave an award to Mendes in 1987 for his ecological work, had left town confident of winning the deal. (CNN, incidentally, was the only network covering the rubber tappers' congress.)

David Puttnam and Chris Menges, who made "The Mission," have a proposal in association with Warner Bros. Warners' local representative, Alberto Salem, believes that Puttnam's link with Adrian Cowell, who made a series of documentaries for Central Television of Britain about Mendes, could prove a decisive advantage.

Designer jeans and visiting cars with Beverly Hills addresses are not a common sight

in gritty Rio Branco, so it was not hard to identify the representative of the Guber Peters Co., which produced "Rain Man" and "Gorillas in the Mist." She said the film rights would be worth well over \$1 million in royalties and benefits.

"We want a commercial success that's going to help the rubber tappers' cause," said the producer, who asked not to be named. "We make controversial movies that others don't dare to touch."

The agents' task is not easy, for Ilsamar Mendes has insisted that all offers be analyzed by the Chico Mendes Foundation, which in turn will channel this wealth to rural communities in the forest. The foundation—set up only this week—has given bidders just 10 days to compete and is insisting on a large degree of control over the script. The final decision will be made with the help of a top U.S. entertainment lawyer, foundation advisers said.

They are concerned that a sudden torrent of money could undermine the fragile unity

of the trade union Mendes built up or change the lifestyles of families living deep in the forest.

Another source of confusion was Maria Eunice Feitosa, who also claimed to be Mendes' widow and therefore entitled to a share in the film proceeds.

But she had no firm evidence to back the claim that Mendes had begun a bigamous second marriage with Ilsamar. When it was discovered that lawyers acting for Maria were also defending the men now accused of murdering Mendes, her suit was exposed as a ploy to prevent the film from being made.

Anthropologist Mary Helena Alegretti, who did much to project Mendes to international fame when he won a U.N. prize for his ecology work, believes the film could be a powerful weapon in the rubber tappers' fight to protect the forest. "The proposals we've received so far are very good and give us confidence about the content," she said.

Alegretti played a key role in helping Mendes persuade development banks to stop lending U.S. taxpayers' money to Brazil until ecological abuses stopped.

Steve Schwartzman of Washington's Environmental Defense Fund will be an adviser to the foundation that decides on the movie.

Schwartzman feels the foreigners are more obsessed with the film than the rubber tappers. "It's indicative that despite all the talk here, the rubber tappers and Indians have not mentioned the movie once; it's something the foundation will deal with." He said the question of artistic control was the most important issue. "We must give a realistic picture," he said.

Not everyone is delighted by the prospect of stardom. Gomercindo Rodriguez, one of the top union advisers, warned, "Chico's struggle and the lifestyle of the rubber tappers is not for sale."

Nor is the Brazilian government likely to be happy about a script in which it almost certainly will appear as the principal villain.

Ministers have been complaining that the fast-growing Amazon ecology movement is a stalking horse for sinister foreign interests, and they may now seize on the film to prove their nationalist theories.

Last week an undercover intelligence operative was unmasked and thrown out of the rubber tappers' conference. Military officers said they needed to observe what foreigners were really up to in Acre State. Perhaps he should have been watching the hotels, or even the Oscar telecast.