

Povos Indígenas no Brasil

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Makers of rain forest film quit Brazil

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RIO DE JANEIRO — Fighting among heirs and followers of Brazil's slain defender of the rain forest, Francisco "Chico" Mendes, has become so bitter that his life story will now be filmed in another country, rather than in Brazil. The project is scheduled to begin in November in Ecuador, 1,000 miles from Mendes' home in the western Amazon state of Acre.

The film makers changed their plans after encountering a host of problems in Acre. Rubber tappers from Mendes' union movement have threatened to blockade filming. Mendes's first wife is suing his second wife, his second wife is suing the state government, and Darli Alves de Silva, one of the ranchers convicted of the 1988 murder, was recently seen outside his maximum-security jail cell, enjoying lunch at a city restaurant.

David Puttnam, whose Enigma Productions is producing the Warner Bros. film, did not return calls made to his London office. Chris Menges, the director, was out of contact in the Ecuadorean Amazon this week as he researched film locations.

Menges, who previously filmed

Movie about slain activist moved to Ecuador

The Mission in Latin America, is believed to have settled on a village in the Napo River area of Ecuador.

Quieter in Ecuador

"Puttnam thinks it will be quieter in Ecuador and that the insurance will be cheaper," said Joffre Rodrigues, the Brazilian co-producer of the film.

The decision to film in Ecuador is a blow to Brazilians who hoped that Brazil's film industry would receive a boost with a locally produced movie about the mild-mannered unionist who became an international symbol of resistance to the Amazon's deforestation.

In June 1989, six months after Mendes' murder, his widow, Ilzamar, cited national pride in explaining why she chose Rodrigues' production company, JN Filmes, spurning offers from eight foreign producers, including Robert Redford and Ted Turner.

"Chico was a Brazilian," said the 24-year-old Mrs. Mendes. "I believe a national production company will make a film which will tell

the authentic story of Chico's life."

But now it appears that the director, the principal producers, the technicians, the script writer and most of the actors will be foreigners.

"Ilzamar was very naive in this," said Mary Helen Allegretti, president of the Institute for Amazon Studies and a close collaborator of Mendes. "What is important is the script and the characters. Whether it's filmed in Brazil, Peru or Ecuador makes no difference."

Four books and a play

Since the death of Mendes, four books and one play have been written about him. Warner Brothers and Puttnam rejected a script by a Brazilian novelist, Marcio Souza, in favor of one by a Hollywood professional, William Mastrosimone. The producers also bought film rights to one of the books, *The Burning Season*, by Andrew Revkin.

Part of what one participant in the movie called "the permanently poisoned" atmosphere in Mendes' hometown of Xapuri stems from

Mrs. Mendes' decision to choose Rodrigues' JN Filmes, a small Rio de Janeiro company, without consulting her husband's union colleagues.

Union members, who make \$4,000 a year per family collecting wild rubber from the forest, were outraged to learn that Rodrigues signed a \$1 million contract in June with Mrs. Mendes and then, three months later, resold the film rights to a foreign company for \$1.8 million.

"JN Filmes is the sleaziest filmmaker in Brazil," said Osmarino Amancio Rodrigues, secretary of the National Council of Rubber Tappers, in a telephone interview from Acre.

In response, Rodrigues of JN Filmes said: "We didn't steal anything. We made the best offer." But he conceded that the union's hostility was the major obstacle to filming in Xapuri. "The rubber tappers have a homicidal anger against JN Filmes," he said.

To smooth relations with the unionists, Menges met in Acre in

June with leaders of the six union and Amazon Indian movements that worked most closely with Mendes.

\$100,000 payments

The director promised to give \$100,000 to each of the groups, including Mrs. Allegretti's Institute for Amazon Studies, and discussed ways of tying the movie's release to the merchandising of products from the Amazon.

But Osmarino Rodrigues, who has a more confrontational style than his predecessor, said on Tuesday that the unionists had three major demands before filming could be done in Acre: prior approval of the script, security for rubber tappers working as extras, and an environmental impact statement about damage caused by filming.

Meanwhile, ranchers in Acre, a frontier state where many people carry pistols, do not look kindly on a film project that perpetuates Mendes' international image as an ecological martyr. Since he was killed by a shotgun blast on Dec. 22, 1988, six other rubber tappers have been killed in Acre.

In another obstacle to filming in Acre, the ranchers opposed to Mr.



RAIN FOREST MARTYR:
 Francisco Mendes

Mendes' preservation efforts retain powerful allies in the state. It was largely foreign pressure that led to Xapuri's first murder trial last December.

In the trial, Darli Alves da Silva, a 54-year-old rancher, and Darci Alves Pereira, his 24-year-old son, each received a 19-year jail sentence for the murder of Mendes.

Housed in the maximum-security block of Acre's state jail, the father and son enjoy their own stove, refrigerator and color television. Last month, a local judge agreed to study their appeal for dismissal of the convictions.