

Povos Indígenas no Brasil

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The Smelters' Price: A Jungle Reduced to Ashes

By MARLISE SIMONS

Special to The New York Times

BELEM, Brazil — The Amazon rain forest, already under siege from roads and dams, mines and cattle, is now about to lose a part of its timber as fuel for industry.

As Brazil continues its drive to conquer parts of the world's greatest rain forest, it has approved construction of new industrial complexes in the eastern Amazon Basin.

The most startling projects, in the view of environmental groups, involve the construction of at least 20 iron smelters that will use wood in the form of charcoal as their main source of energy. As a result, Government officials have confirmed, millions of hardwood trees are expected to be felled and burned in the coming years.

"This means massive destruction of primary forest that will be irretrievable," said Ibsen Câmara, a retired admiral who is president of the Brazilian Foundation for Nature Conservation. "It is complete madness. We are going to try and stop these plans."

Another vast project drawing strong criticism is a favorite of President José Sarney: a 1,000-mile-long railroad, part of which is to run through areas covered with virgin forest. Like other new railroads in the wilderness, it is expected to bring settlers, land speculators and cattle barons in its wake.

The Vanishing Forest

"The No. 1 problem of our state already is deforestation," said Rosyan Campos, director of a development institute in the state of Pará, where several of the new plants will be built. "The worst is that these things just go ahead, whether we like it or not."

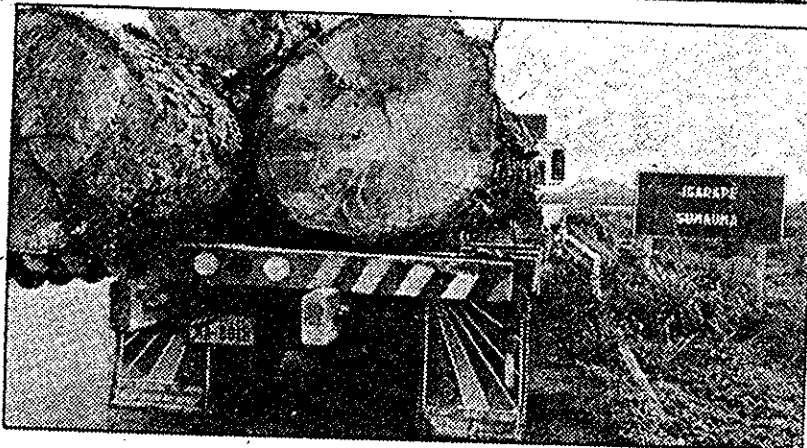
Brazil, long berated in international forums for ravaging its prodigious jungle and water resources in its rush for development, has included environmental concerns in its official oratory in recent years.

But critics here are pointing to the



The New York Times/Marlise Simons

A burned and cleared section of the Amazon rain forest near Marabá, Brazil, where iron-smelting plants are to be built. A tractor-trailer carries huge hardwood logs from the site. At least 20 plants, using charcoal as their main fuel source, are planned for the area. Such projects have raised protests from conservationists.



new plants and railroad as further evidence that environmental considerations are not allowed to stand in the way of most development plans. The Government rapidly approved the new plans, overriding requests that they be debated in Congress and ignoring legal requirements that their effects on the environment be adequately studied. Members of the National Council of Environmental Protection have complained that they have not been consulted or notified.

Although the people of the Amazon have long used charcoal and logs for energy, the smelters will be the first new enterprises to burn trees on such a scale since an American pulp plant was built along the Amazon River two decades ago.

Experts say no precise figures on deforestation are available, but by some estimates the drive to develop the Amazon region has destroyed close to 10 percent of the virgin forest in the last 15 years.

The smelters, nine of which are about to start construction, will be near the towns of Marabá and Parauapebas in Pará and Açailândia in Maranhão, two states that occupy the eastern third of the Amazon basin. According to a Government study, these first nine smelters will require 1.1 million tons of charcoal a year, or roughly twice that amount in wood.

"Imagine a building 100 meters long, 100 meters wide and 50 stories high — that's how much charcoal they need per year," Mr. Câmara said. "It is so absurd, it's difficult to believe this has been approved."

Several of the smelters will move to the Amazon sites from the central state of Minas Gerais, where they have run out of charcoal. "They finished the wood there," said Dr. Paulo Nogueira, until recently Brazil's Secretary of the Environment. "There was inadequate control and our laws are full of shortcomings. They were obliged to plant eucalyptus, but they never did."

Although privately owned, the smelters will receive Government incentives under a national development project known as Greater Carajás. This huge undertaking aims to exploit the region's rich mineral deposits and has already turned Pará into one of the states where both growth and deforestation have been fastest in recent years. Here the smelters will get their iron ore from a new mine at Carajás — the world's largest — and a new railroad, which are already operating.

At least six new oven complexes are planned to char the logs. "There is a moving army of charcoal makers in the forest," said Dr. Clara Pandolfo of the country's Amazon devel-

opment agency. "But it must be made close to the industries."

In Belém, the capital of Pará, the projects have provoked protests from university groups, private citizens and publications. At the same time, the local government has included pictures of the new industrial sites in a television campaign advertising the state's progress.

Critics say the plan to export the pig iron from the smelters to Japan contributes little to Brazilian development. Moreover, they say, the companies' own study states that to enhance their viability and profits, the charcoal complexes should produce an additional 800,000 tons of coal a year for export to Western Europe and Japan.

Officials at the Institute for Forestry Development, the country's main authority for forestry management, said that even if the smelters or the charcoal companies were to plant their own "fuel wood," this would take five to seven years to grow.

But they said they believed no replanting was called for because the forest to be leveled was earmarked for clearing to make room for new settlements. They said that in any case their agency did not have the budget, staff or political influence to supervise wrongdoings in the vast forest.

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