

Editorial

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Half-Measures to Protect the Amazon

Brazil's President, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, now has on his desk new legislation that finally gives the country's environmental agency a modicum of power to enforce environmental laws.

A coalition of ranchers and industrialists managed to strip the bill of some of its toughest provisions, and is trying to persuade Mr. Cardoso to veto the important measures that remain.

Before doing so, he should think carefully about a report issued last week by the Brazilian National Space Research Institute, which found that deforestation in Brazil's Amazon is growing alarmingly.

Brazil has good laws on the books protecting the Amazon but no legal power to enforce them. The environmental agency can levy only absurdly small fines and collects less than 10 percent of them. The legislation passed last week to correct this has been sitting in Congress for seven years.

Top on the list of measures that Mr. Cardoso should preserve is a requirement that companies pay the cost of cleaning up environmental damage they caused, even if the Government cannot prove the damage was intentional. Mr. Cardoso should also save a provision that prohibits proven polluters from getting Government contracts or bidding on Government loans for several years, and another measure setting daily fines for companies that refuse to clean up their damage.

Enforcement of environmental laws is particularly crucial given the evidence that damage to the Amazon is rapidly worsening.

This contributes to global warming and destroys a forest that houses the most diverse group of plants and animals in the world. The new report, which uses satellite data, found that clear-cutting has been rising at a rapid rate.

The 1995-96 burning season saw 7,000 square miles destroyed, almost double the annual deforestation that took

place four years earlier.

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The Amazon suffers from other damage not extensive enough to show up in satellite pictures, such as selective logging, fires and drying.

A recent report by Brazil's Congress found that the total area affected annually is more than 22,000 square miles. Another study, by the Woods Hole Research Institute in Massachusetts, found that cutting and burning have dried out the forest to the point that it could burn out of control. Brazil's deforestation is likely to rise as Asian logging companies move deeper into the Amazon.

Mr. Cardoso must refrain from further weakening an already weak bill.

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