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Brazil Tells Americans
Their Rain-Forest Fears

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RIO BRANCO, Brazil, Jan. 19 — In a stifling hall in the heart of the Amazon, a group of American legislators sat listening to the people of the rain forest — Indians and rubber tappers, who appealed for help from abroad to save their jungle habitat.

Three days later, in air-conditioned offices in Brasilia, the capital, the same legislators were told by President José Sarney and other civilian and military officials that Brazil would not permit its sovereignty to be threatened by a foreign role in protecting the Amazon.

At yet another stop on their fact-finding mission to Brazil, which ended Thursday, the three Senators and two Congressmen heard businessmen in São Paulo argue that the country's growing population and urgent need to develop demanded opening up the vast tropical hinterlands.

These contrasting responses within Brazil offered a glimpse of the complex political, economic and social factors involved in drawing up any long-term strategy to slow down the destruction of the largest rain forest on earth.

"The internal dynamics of Brazil are inevitably more complicated than the headlines would suggest," said Senator Timothy E. Wirth of Colorado, head of the delegation, as it arrived in this distant corner of the Amazon.

Anger at Interference

While growing international concern about the felling and burning of vast forest areas has raised the hopes of environmentalists and forest dwellers, it has added to the nervousness of Brazilian politicians and military leaders about foreign interference.

Already sensing a campaign against Brazil after protests over huge forest fires this summer set by cattle ranchers and land speculators, Brazilian officials have been further taken aback by the international publicity that followed the assassination last month of Francisco Mendes Filho. Mr. Mendes, a leader of Amazonian rubber tappers, was murdered near this city on Dec. 22, and his campaign to save the forest from the hands of ranchers and speculators had made him known abroad.

"If people turn the problems of the Amazon into a campaign against Brazil, it can lead to xenophobic nationalism," Rubem Bayma Denis, the head of the President's military staff, said after the legislators left Brasilia.

The purpose of the American Congressional mission was to study ways of generating resources for environmental protection in this region where countries are squeezed by economic re-

cession and huge foreign debts. One idea already tested in Bolivia and Costa Rica involves an intricate financing method, whereby an outside entity would reimburse the Government for a portion of the nation's foreign debt and the money would then be used for local environmental projects.

When the subject of "debt for nature" swaps was raised in Brasilia, according to delegation members, Foreign Minister Roberto de Abreu Sodré enthusiastically endorsed the delegation's suggestion to create a Brazilian foundation for such a purpose.

However, when the delegation later visited the presidential palace, President Sarney said he opposed links between Brazil's \$115 billion foreign debt and the environment. Mr. Sarney said this might be counterproductive and create xenophobia in Brazil.

"We don't want the Amazon to become a green Persian Gulf," he said in apparent reference to foreign involvement in the gulf region.

Mr. Sarney echoed the view of high-ranking Brazilian military officers that other countries are not only trying to hold back the country's development but that foreigners also covet the enormous mineral, biological and agricultural resources of the Amazon.

Brazilian officials have also argued that the industrialized nations have no right to criticize Brazil because they have destroyed so much of their own environment and are responsible for most of the world's pollution.

Appeals From All Sides

In Rio Branco, the state capital of Acre, the American delegation heard very different opinions about the need for foreign assistance in Amazon protection programs. The state Governor, Flaviano de Melo, said that without urgent financial help from the Brazilian Government or from abroad, the state could create no new reserves and that areas already set aside as reserves would soon be invaded.

Even more dramatic were the appeals from members of the rubber tappers' union, long led by Mr. Mendes, the slain environmentalist. The union has often staged sit-ins to prevent bulldozers from moving into the forest.

A major threat to their land, the rubber tappers explained, was a new road that will penetrate Acre, a state that has been almost inaccessible and where much of the forest cover is intact. "We are not against the paving of the road," said Julio Barbosa, Mr. Mendes's successor. "But if the lands of the rubber tappers and the Indians are not legalized, we can say goodbye to this part of the Amazon."