

Povos Indígenas no Brasil

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Nationalist rhetoric clouds Amazon plan

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When President Sarney of Brazil unveiled his plan to protect the Amazon region last week, ecology was the issue immediately at hand.

But behind the bold talk about conservation lurked another message, replete with surly nationalist rhetoric and intended to strike a blow back at the First World.

For while Senhor Sarney delivered his bold "green" speech he was, in fact, seeing red. "The Amazon is ours," Senhor Sarney intoned, in a sometimes quaking voice, during his 30-minute speech before some 300 politicians, scientists and military men in the east wing of the Planalto presidential palace. "We are the ones who know it best."

The speech was strikingly reminiscent of the 1950s, when Brazil was ruled by the fiery authoritarian populist, Getulio Vargas, who at the time inspired a popular movement to take

over the foreign-dominated oil industry, igniting nationalist passions with his slogan: "The petroleum is ours!"

Though it may have seemed timid before Senhor Sarney's speech, the environmental protection plan itself, called pointedly "Our Nature", was hardly negligible.

Among the nearly 50 measures signed into law, President Sarney announced the creation of two forest preserves in the Amazon region and three new national parks.

To halt the wave of slash-and-burn deforestation in the rainforest, he established brigades of forest guards who will receive logistical support from the Army and Air Force.

President Sarney also announced a formal suspension of official subsidies that Brasilia once lavished upon Amazon agricultural and ranching projects, which have accelerated deforestation. A renewed campaign of land reform will divert smallholders

from the fragile northern forest regions of Amazonia to the more fertile scrublands in central and western Brazil.

Brasilia also intends to crack down on unscrupulous logging operations and to "discipline" gold prospectors, who have fouled rivers and streams with mercury.

Brazil's dwindling forest tribes, whose lands are besieged by the crush of settler civilization, are to be afforded a greater measure of protection.

To international ecologists, these are tardy moves to reverse the destruction of one of Brazil's, and the planet's, last great stretches of rainforest.

Over the last year, in fact, Brazil has become the target of mounting pressures from environmentalists and governments in the industrialized world for failing to halt the destruction of the Amazon rainforest.

Ecology groups in the US and

Europe have put pressure on banks to halt loans to development projects in Brazil considered damaging to the environment. Only last month President Mitterrand of France even told an environmental conference that governments ought to be willing to "cede a portion of their sovereignty" over national territory for the betterment of the planet.

But Senhor Sarney angrily rejected such global proprietary claims as a plot by the rich world to keep the poor world poor. "The international community puts us in the defendant's chair," Senhor Sarney exclaimed.

"What they want is for us to be slaves (and) to accept that the great powers come to dictate what we do."

The message from Brasilia sounded like a declaration of independence, and in a way it was.

The fanfares and rhetoric made it clear that Brazilians are not only going to protect the environment — they are going to do it their way.