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Brazil's Eye on the Amazon

Last month, Brazil inaugurated a high-tech radar system to keep watch on its two million square miles of Amazon jungle. The American-financed \$1.4 billion Amazon Vigilance System will help catch drug smugglers and detect incursions by Colombia's guerrillas. But it was originally conceived and designed for environmental protection, and can still be a key tool in combating deforestation and illegal mining. The system, however, is only as good as Brazil's willingness to use the information it provides - and there the record is worrisome.

An average of more than 7,500 square miles of the Amazon go up in smoke every year as ranchers and farmers clear land. The deforestation destroys biodiversity and, by robbing the landscape of its ability to retain water, contributes to drought and erosion.

The new radar system can help. The state of Mato Grosso, for example, requires approval to burn land, and now officials can check that they are burning only the approved land. It would help if this law were in use in every state.

In truth, the problem in much of the Amazon is not that the authorities do not know about illegal deforestation, but that they are indifferent or in league with it. A major battleground today is 600 miles of road through the state of Pará that the government is promising to pave. Entirely predictably, ranchers and big soy farmers are seizing land along the Pará corridor in anticipation that its value will rise. The American group Environmental Defense says that if no measures are taken, the road will result in new deforestation of an area larger than West Virginia.

In addition, at least seven rural union leaders fighting the illegal seizures of land in Pará have been murdered in the last year. One prominent leader of a regional coalition, Ademir Alfeu Federicci, was shot last August. Local police called his killing part of an ordinary robbery, a theory so preposterous that prosecutors handed them back the case. But the lack of progress since has signaled the government's indifference to these crimes, and last month another union leader, Bartolomeu Morais da Silva, was tortured and murdered. The new system could be a major step forward for environmental protection, but the eye on the Amazon will be of limited use if Brazil's authorities continue to watch illegal behavior - and blink.