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Roads to ruin

'Corridors of power' has a new meaning for the people of the Amazon as massive transport and energy projects threaten to devastate the region. **Jan Rocha** reports

A NEW internationally-financed assault on the Amazon rain forest is under way. European, US and Asian investment banks and multinational agencies are financing dozens of infrastructure megaprojects that will rip open the heart of the Amazon Basin. Roads, railways, gas and oil pipelines, industrial waterways, mining operations and hydro-electric dams are being built or planned. The aim is to provide foreign consumers with cheaper grain, minerals and lumber by reducing transport costs.

Instead of travelling thousands of miles to the South Atlantic ports of Rio and Santos, the new Amazon export corridors will provide Brazil with outlets on the Pacific, Caribbean and North Atlantic coasts, thousands of miles nearer the world's markets. Millions of acres of new farmland on the Amazon fringe will be turned over to export crops, especially soya beans. New dams will provide energy for mining operations, and for the burgeoning Amazon townships.

Seven of these projects — total cost, more than \$3 billion — are among President Fernando Henrique Cardoso's priorities, due for completion by 1999. They include the paving of existing dirt roads normally impassable during the tropical rainy season and the dredging of Amazon tributaries to turn them into industrial waterways for giant grain barges.

A 300-mile stretch of the BR 174 highway will link Manaus, the Amazon capital, to Caracas, the Venezuelan capital, and the Caribbean; a 500-mile stretch of the BR 364 will run through the western Amazon to the Peruvian border and then down to the Pacific coast;

and the 700-mile long Madeira River will be made navigable with signalling buoys, piers and grain terminals. From the Madeira, the barges will sail another 1,000 miles to the mouth of the Amazon and so into the Atlantic. This will cut three days off the old route via Santos, reducing the cost by approximately \$40 per tonne.

There will be a 2,000-mile waterway network, joining the Tocantins and Araguaia rivers, to enable grain from central Brazil to be shipped out through the port of Belem at the Amazon mouth. Ferronorte (the "grain train"), a 3,000-mile railway, will link new grain-growing areas in Mato Grosso and Para states to the south

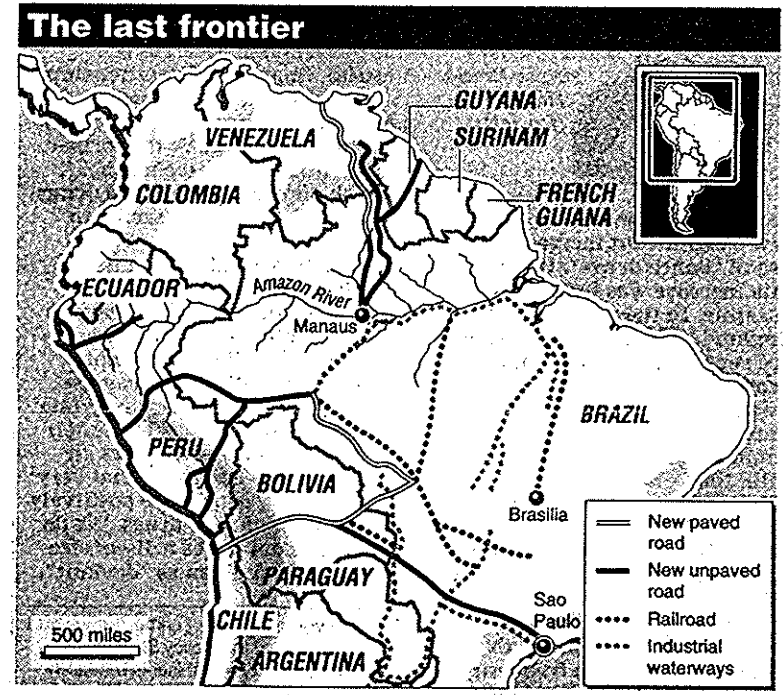
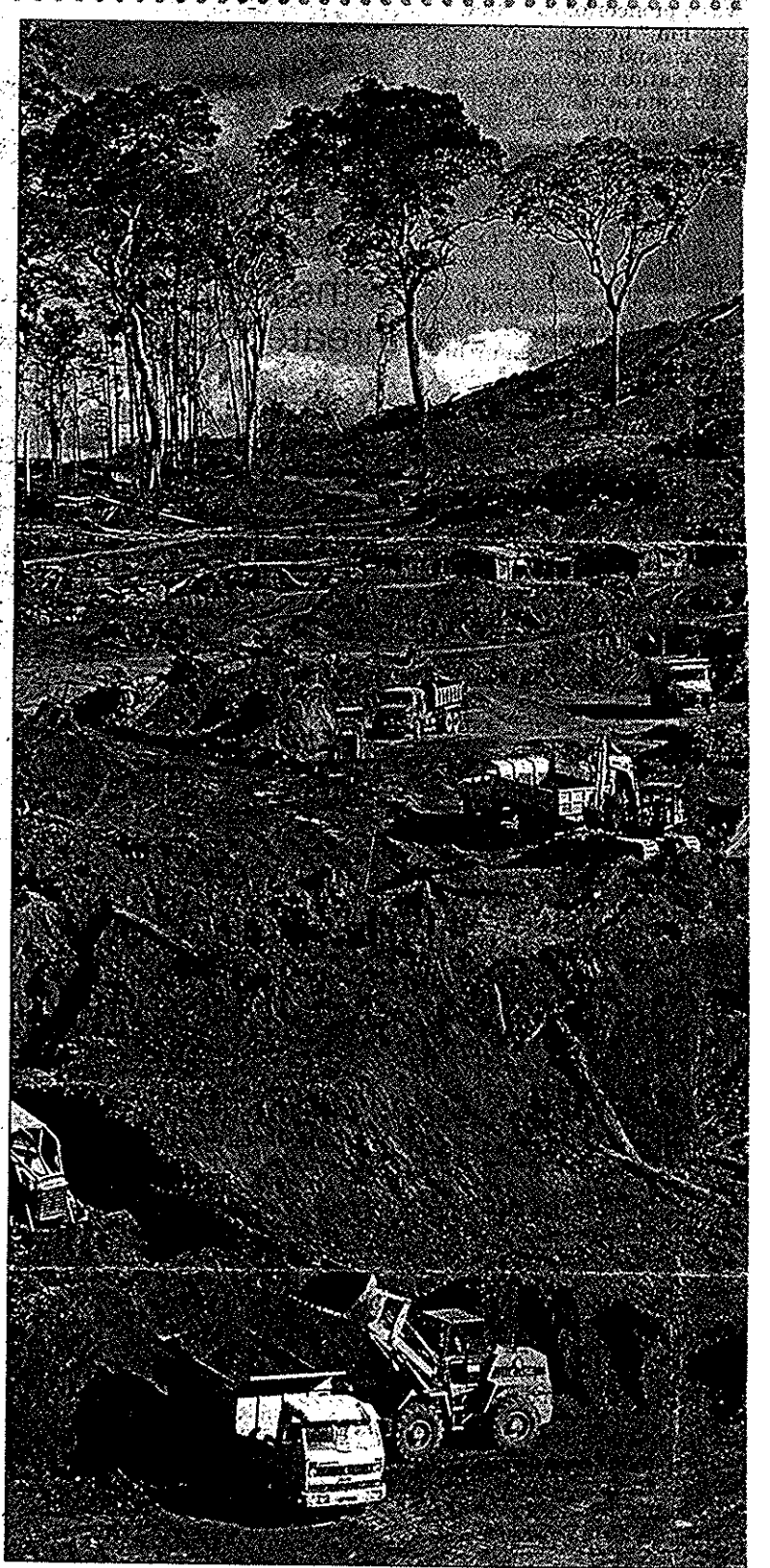
and north; when completed, more than 800,000 square miles of land could become accessible for farming. A 1,000-mile energy transmission line will run from the giant Tucuruí dam to bring electricity to towns in western Para, and a pipeline will bring natural gas from the Urucu field in the Amazon River to Manaus.

Besides these seven priority projects, Brazil also plans to build 10 new hydro-electric dams in the region, while Amazon neighbours Peru, Bolivia, Venezuela and Guyana all have road and energy projects in the border areas.

The development of the Amazon is a result of the economic boom that has followed an end to hyper-



New horizons... unspoiled areas of Amazonia (left) will be opened up, encouraging export of the region's resources, such as those extracted from the tin ore mines (right)
PHOTOGRAPHS: JOHN MAIER (right) MARTIN WENDLER



inflation in Latin America with the privatisation of state-owned enterprises and the integration of the regional economies. Integration means interconnected — instead of rival — transport and energy systems. And the world is full of money looking for such schemes to finance.

But what will be the cost, to the Amazon region's original inhabitants, of providing cheaper prices for rich world consumers? The five million square miles of the Amazon Basin contain the world's largest tropical rain forest — home to half the earth's species, and the richest store of biodiversity on the planet. The new export corridors make no provision for environmental protection. Fifty thousand indigenous people live in the Brazilian Amazon alone. For them, there is no mega project; very often, there is not even the basic minimum.

Wildcat gold miners and loggers who invade indigenous reserves are supported by local politicians and are untroubled by the police. And the budget for indigenous health and education is pitiable. A recent Ministry of Health report describing the degrading conditions in hostels provided for Indians seeking medical treatment is an indictment of the government's indifference.

It said that overcrowding and lack of food lead to violence, and that Indian women are forced to prostitute themselves in order to eat. Explaining the failure of an Aids awareness campaign, the report admitted that the images of terminally ill patients did not shock the Indians because they were so used to seeing the same gauntness and weakness caused by malaria, TB, hepatitis B and malnutrition. At the end of this month, indige-

nous organisations from Brazil, Guyana and Venezuela will meet together for the first time to discuss the impact of the mega projects, drawn up without consultation. They hope to mobilise public opinion and set off a public debate about the consequences for the Amazon rain forest and its people.

Are there alternatives? Are waterways less damaging than roads and railways? Can the export corridors be planned to transverse less biologically significant areas? Will the transport projects provide for the needs of isolated communities? These are some of the questions that have never been posed, let alone answered, in the headlong rush to push the projects through.

A THREAT assessment report prepared by Amazon Watch, a US-based organisation, lists some of the environmental impacts. The mechanised farming and monoculture plantations encouraged by the transport projects will result in loss of forest cover and native vegetation and large-scale pesticide pollution. The Madeira waterway will pollute the water used by five indigenous communities. The Araguaia-Tocantins waterway involves draining wetlands — including the Bananal Island, a national park of unique biodiversity — and will affect the way of life of about 6,000 Indians.

The BR 174 road runs through or near the lands of 16,000 Indians and several ecological reserves. The BR 364, linking Brazil to Peru and Bolivia, runs through a thickly-forested area and will encourage loggers. It could also become a new drug trade route, giving cocaine traders easier access to the Atlantic, and so to Europe.