
Brazil: Whose sovereignty?

In international processes related to forests and biodiversity, Brazil is one of the countries with a stronger discourse regarding the defense of countries' sovereignty. Unfortunately, it is only a discourse. In reality, what most of Brazil's different governments have actually done is to open the door wide open to foreign investment and the results have been increased poverty and environmental degradation. Which has nothing to do with defending the country's sovereignty. Quite the opposite. Examples of the above abound and we have chosen only one recent example of yet one more project against the Amazon forest: the Urucu Gas and Oil Project in Amazonas.

This project is to expand oil and gas production in the Urucu oil field, in an area of highly dense tropical forest, among the most remote and least ecologically disturbed of the Amazon basin. The total project cost is estimated at about 1.04 billion dollars and will also include two additional pipelines (420 and 550 kms respectively), to be buried 1-3 metres underground. Laying and maintaining the pipelines will require the opening of a 15-30 metre-wide road along their entire length, thus resulting in the destruction of some 200,000 hectares of forest exclusively for that purpose. But that is not all. Every 15 kilometres, clearings large enough for a helicopter to land are to be made and given that both the roads and the clearings must be kept open for the estimated life of the project (20-50 years), this will open up to further forest degradation. It is a proven fact that no other single factor more clearly leads to deforestation --acting as conduits for loggers, miners, ranchers and colonists-- in the Amazon than the opening of new roads.

Various small, rural communities along the Urucu and Solimoes Rivers have already suffered from the construction of the first 280 km of pipelines completed in 1998. The pipeline road blockaded three streams, formerly used by communities for drinking water, bathing and washing and causing the manioc flour production, a principal source of income and subsistence staple, to cease. Drinking water now has to be brought from a considerable distance. Various other creeks used by local populations along the Urucu River were silted up or rendered inaccessible by the pipeline. Fish populations have fallen dramatically in the Urucu River. Brazil nut and fruit trees have been cut down in several places.

The project is supported by the Japanese Export-Import Bank (JEXIM), which has already committed US\$ 64 million for the construction of the Urucu Natural Gas processing plant. The JEXIM Bank is thus the financial catalyst for a huge, environmentally risky scheme that already is on track to catalyse a major development disaster of the sort tragically familiar in the Amazon. Both Japan and Brazil are signatories to the Convention on Biological Diversity, but business seems to be business and biodiversity conservation something to talk about.

Article based on information from: Rich, Bruce et al., "Export Credit Agencies in Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela", Environmental Defense, 2001(?)

