Brazil: Environmentalists murdered in the Amazon and debate over a new Forest Code: Impunity must end!

On May 24, environmental activists José Cláudio Ribeiro da Silva and Maria do Espírito Santo, who were husband and wife, were shot and killed near their home in the southeast of the state of Pará, in the Amazon rainforest region of Brazil. As leaders of the National Council of Extractive Workers (CNS), formerly known as the National Council of Rubber Tappers, they fought for the sustainable and diversified use of the forest and against illegal logging and deforestation. Their murders are two more on a long list that seems never-ending…

The logging industry, which yields exorbitant profits, is at the root of this violence, and continues to be a direct cause of significant deforestation in the Amazon region. Further deforestation is caused by large landholders clearing new pastureland for cattle to supply the huge meat-packing plant established in the region, financed by the Brazilian government through the state-owned Brazilian development bank, BNDES, and run by big transnational corporations in the meat marketing industry. Brazil is already the world's leading exporter of beef, and the Brazilian government has set a goal of doubling beef exports this decade.

Other industrial interests, like the expansion of soy bean plantations to produce animal feed for industrialized countries and biodiesel for the domestic market, iron and bauxite mining, and hundreds of planned hydroelectric dam projects like Belo Monte in Pará, promise to destroy hundreds of thousands more hectares of forests, along with all their natural wealth and biodiversity. Added to this is the pressure exerted by the expansion of sugarcane plantations for ethanol production, which the Brazilian government aims to increase several times over. Although this expansion is concentrated in the central-western area of the country, where it is contributing to the destruction of the Cerrado tropical savannah ecosystem, it is displacing the cultivation of other crops and pushing them towards the Amazon region, leading to yet more deforestation.

This is the background to the current heated debate in the Brazilian Congress over one of the most controversial bills proposed in recent years: the reform of the country's Forest Code, spearheaded by Deputy Aldo Rebelo. The bill was passed by the Chamber of Deputies, the lower house of the Brazilian Congress, on May 24 – the same day as the brutal murder of the two environmental activists. It will now move up to the Senate.

What is the Forest Code?
The current Forest Code is a 1965 law that stipulates, among other provisions, that the owners of all rural landholdings in Brazil must maintain a certain percentage of the native forest on their property as a "legal reserve", which cannot be cut down. The percentage ranges from 20% in the Mata Atlântica or Atlantic Forest region to 80% in the Amazon Rainforest region. In addition, the Code includes the category of Permanent Preservation Areas (PPAs) for forests in particularly sensitive areas such as riverbanks and the tops and slopes of hills. For instance, depending on the width of a river, the Code stipulates that a strip of at least 30 metres along its banks must be protected from deforestation.

Why are changes to the Forest Code being discussed?
Currently, the vast majority of farmers do not comply with the stipulations of the Forest Code. The situation is most serious when it comes to large agribusiness landholdings in the Amazon. Almost none of their owners respect the requirement to preserve 80% of the forest cover on their properties as a legal reserve. This has become increasingly obvious as Brazilian federal government agencies have stepped up monitoring, control and the application of fines in recent years.

What are the changes proposed?
The reforms proposed by Deputy Rebelo include, among others, an amnesty for landowners who illegally deforested areas that they were required to protect as legal reserves up until July 2008. They also include the reduction of the size of legal reserves and PPAs, opening the way for further deforestation. Legal reserves would no longer be required whatsoever on landholdings of up to four “rural modules” (the equivalent of 400 hectares in the case of the Amazon region). And, to the benefit of tree plantation companies, up to 50% of deforested legal reserves can be “recovered” through the establishment of monoculture plantations of exotic tree species, such as eucalyptus. Moreover, this so-called “reforestation” would not need to be carried out on the specific landholding in question, but could take place elsewhere in the region, allowing for vast areas of nothing but monoculture plantations. The proposed changes would also take away jurisdiction over environmental management from the federal government.

The reforms proposed by Rebelo serve the interests of large landholders in the agribusiness sector, who are represented in Congress by the so-called ruralista bloc of lawmakers. They are pushing for a thorough revision of the Forest Code that will allow them to further expand their operations and will grant an amnesty for fines already handed out for illegal deforestation – some of which are owed by ruralista deputies and senators themselves!

In the meantime, social movements representing rural workers, environmentalists and scientists want to maintain the current Forest Code and would like to see complementary measures to guarantee the protection of the environment and small-scale family farming, which is in a completely different class from the large-scale operations of the agribusiness sector.

What is at stake?
What is at stake is the struggle for the conservation of forests and water resources in Brazil versus a “developmentalist” model that serves the interests of the logging industry and big national and transnational agribusiness companies, who want larger areas of land to fill with cattle, soy beans, corn, eucalyptus trees, etc. as well as an amnesty, in other words, impunity for those responsible for illegal deforestation. It should be mentioned that according to reports from monitoring agencies, deforestation rates in states like Mato Grosso have begun to rise at a frightening pace in the last few months, after years of consistently decreased rates. In addition to an amnesty for illegal deforestation that has already taken place, if the proposals of the ruralista bloc are passed, tens of thousands of hectares of forest could be legally destroyed, undermining all of the good intentions and efforts aimed at reducing deforestation, which Brazil so proudly publicizes both nationally and internationally.

Finally
In 1965, when the current Forest Code was adopted, the protection of biodiversity was already an important argument in its favour. Today, however, there is the added importance of the role of forest conservation with regard to climate change, which is primarily caused by greenhouse gas emissions from industrialized countries but is aggravated by deforestation, which further contributes to carbon emissions. The impacts of climate change affect everyone, but they particularly affect the most vulnerable sectors of the population, not to mention the increased flooding that will inevitably result if

forests in fragile areas like riverbanks, hilltops and slopes are cut down because they are no longer protected as PPAs. And once again, it is the most vulnerable sectors who will be hardest hit.

Brazil's territory encompasses the largest tract of rainforest in the world, and the country strives to portray itself internationally as a champion of the environment and a "green" economy. Maintaining and strengthening the current Forest Code is crucial for preserving this rainforest and thereby protecting the future of the planet, and especially the future of Brazil and the local, indigenous and traditional communities who struggle to defend it.

Maintaining the Forest Code also means fighting back against the endless greed for profits of the large landholders, logging companies and national and transnational agribusiness corporations who are destroying this priceless natural resource. This was the struggle waged by José Cláudio and Maria. To ensure that their struggle was not in vain, we must defend the current Forest Code, and cannot allow an amnesty for those guilty of deforestation and destruction – first and foremost, the large landholders. At the same time, we demand a thorough investigation of these murders and, above all, rigorous punishment for those who killed José Cláudio and Maria and so many others who have lost their lives in the struggle to defend the Amazon rainforest.

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