Brazil: Agro-fuels represent a new cycle of devastation of the Amazon and Cerrado regions

The present energy matrix is basically compounded by oil (35%), coal (23%) and natural gas (21%). The nations of the OECD -- the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development -- which account for 56% of the planet's energy consumption are desperately in need of a liquid fuel replacement for oil. Worldwide petroleum extraction rates are expected to peak this year, and global supply will likely dwindle significantly in the next fifty years.

The Bush Administration is committed to significantly expanding biofuels to reduce its dependence upon foreign oil (the US imports 61% of the crude oil it consumes). Although a range of prospects for biofuels exists, ethanol derived from corn and soy currently constitutes 99% of all biofuel use in the US.

The energy contained in grains or plants is actually an agro-chemical metamorphosis of solar energy transformed into fuel – biodiesel and ethanol – through vegetable oil or alcohol. The best conditions for this process are present in the countries of the South where there is greater solar energy.

The production of fuel from sunflower seeds, corn, soybean, almonds, oil palm or sugar cane is presented as a good intention – that of substituting oil, a contaminating and non-renewable fuel, by renewable fuels – and will be widely advertised because it is presented as a gesture of goodwill to curb global warming.

However the so-called "solution" aims at leaving untouched the present energy wasting and individual transportation model that must be replaced by a model based on collective transportation. The energy crisis has provided an opportunity for powerful global partnerships between petroleum, grain, genetic engineering, and automotive corporations. These new alliances are deciding the future of the world's agricultural landscapes. The biofuels boom will further consolidate their hold over our food and fuel systems and allow them to determine what, how and how much will be grown, resulting in more rural poverty, environmental destruction and hunger. The ultimate beneficiaries of the biofuel revolution will be grain merchant giants, including Cargill, ADM and Bunge; petroleum companies such as BP, Shell, Chevron, Neste Oil, Repsol and Total; car companies such as General Motors, Volkswagen AG, FMC-Ford France, PSA Peugeot-Citroen and Renault; and biotech giants such as Monsanto, DuPont, and Syngenta.

In an initiative promoted by the Governor of the State of Florida, Jeb Bush, the former Brazilian Minister of Agriculture, Roberto Rodrigues and the President of the Inter-American Development Bank, the Inter-American Ethanol Commission was launched in Miami. Furthermore, the purpose of President Bush's Latin American tour this March to Brazil, Uruguay, Colombia, Guatemala and Mexico was to achieve that the governments of the region promote large-scale production of biofuels – such as alcohol from sugar cane and ethanol from corn – for export to the US market. The objective is for the countries of the South to concentrate their agriculture on producing fuel to supply the cars and trucks of the first world and thus it will not have to depend on oil imported from countries that the US considers problematic (such as Venezuela, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia and Angola).

All this will reinforce the trade relation between Brazil and the US which is already the largest importer of Brazilian ethanol, importing 58% of the nation's total produced ethanol in 2006. Far from good news for Brazil, if the renewable fuel standards for ethanol proposed by the Bush administration were to be met by Brazilian sugarcane, Brazil would need to increase its production by an additional 135 billion liters per year.

Given the new global energy context, Brazilian politicians and industry officials are formulating a new vision for the economic future of the country, centered on production of energy sources to displace 10% of world gasoline use in the next 20 years. This would require a five-fold increase in the land area devoted to sugar production, from six to 30 million hectares.

And not only sugar but also soybean and other potential energy crops. In response, Brazil alone will likely deforest an additional 60 million hectares of land in the near future. New cultivation will lead to land clearing in new areas that will likely face deforestation comparable to that in the Pernambuco region, where only 2.5% of the original forest cover remains.

Biofuels are initiating a new cycle of expansion and devastation in the Cerrado region where the planted area is rapidly expanding and where the natural vegetation cover is expected to have disappeared by 2030. The Amazon is also threatened. The Brazilian chemical engineer, Expedito Parente, who owns the first patent registered in the world for the production of biodiesel on an industrial level declared that "We have 80 million hectares in the Amazon that are going to become the Saudi Arabia of biodiesel."

Presently, 85 percent of Brazil's total soybean production comes from five States: Mato Grosso, Mato Grosso do Sul, Paraná, Goiás and Rio Grande do Sul, although lately in areas in the north of the country (Rondonia, Pará and Roraima) amazing advances have been recorded. The total land used for soybean cultivation has increased by a factor of 57 since 1961 and the volume of production has multiplied 138 times. Fifty-five percent of the soy crop, or 11.4 million hectares, is genetically modified. The development plan "Avança Brasil" is aimed in this direction. It seeks to expand the agricultural frontier, penetrating deeply into the forest area to promote soybean cultivation, with the Government intending to allocate some 40 billion dollars for this purpose. President Lula has declared that transgenic soybean will be used for agrofuels and "good soybean" for human consumption.

Soy cultivation has already resulted in the deforestation of 21 million hectares of forests in Brazil. Monocultural production of soy in the Amazon Basin has rendered much of the soil infertile. Poor soils necessitate increased application of industrial fertilizers for competitive levels of productivity. One hundred thousand hectares of depleted former soy-growing lands have been abandoned to cattle-grazing, which leads to further degradation. Furthermore, soybean expansion leads to extreme land and income concentration. In Brazil, soybean cultivation displaces eleven agricultural workers for every new worker it employs. This is not a new phenomenon. In the 1970s, 2.5 million people were displaced by soybean production in Parana, and 300,000 were displaced in Rio Grande do Sul. Many of these now landless people moved to the Amazon where they cleared pristine forests.

The advancement of the "agricultural frontier" for biofuels is an attempt against the food sovereignty of Southern nations as land for food production is increasingly being devoted to feed the cars of people in the North. The amount of cereal needed to fill a tank of almost 100 litres once is sufficient to feed one person for a whole year. Biofuel production also affects consumers directly by increasing the cost of food.

Only strategic alliances and coordinated action of social movements (farmers' organizations, environmental and farm labor movements, NGOs, consumer lobbies, committed members of the academic sector, etc) can put pressure on governments and multinational companies to ensure that these trends are halted. Joint work is needed to ensure that all countries retain the right to achieve food sovereignty via agroecologically-based, local food production systems, land reform, access to water, seeds and other resources and domestic farm and food policies that respond to the true needs of farmers and consumers.

Article based on: "O Mito dos Biocombustíveis", Edivan Pinto and Marluce Melo, Comisión Pastoral de la Tierra Regional Nordeste – CPT NE, and Maria Luisa Mendonça, Red Social de Justicia y Derechos Humanos, 23 February 2007; "The ecological and social tragedy of crop-based biofuel production in the Americas", Miguel A Altieri, Elizabeth Bravo, complete version (in English) in http://www.wrm.org.uy/subjects/biofuels.html#analytical; "Estados Unidos y Brasil: La nueva alianza etanol", Raúl Zibechi, http://www.wrm.org.uy/temas/Biocombustibles/Alianza_Etanol.html; El mito de los biocombustibles, Edivan Pinto, Marluce Melo and Maria Luisa Mendonça, Agencia Latinoamericana de Informacion – ALAI, March 2007, sent by Biodiversidad en América Latina http://www.biodiversidadla.org/content/view/full/30737; "Bodiesel… o biotrampa?" 2006, http://www.iccc.es/2006/08/07/biodiesel-o-biotrampa/#pp0.