
The two faces of the Brazilian policy on forests

At the COP4 of the Climate Change Convention held in Buenos Aires, Brazil, together with China and India, led the position of developing countries demanding the acknowledgement of historical responsibilities by countries in relation to climate change. The Brazilian delegation also underscored the need for the protection of the Amazon forest. However, domestic forest policy does not seem to go in the same direction.

During a recent workshop on the environmental impact of large-scale development projects in the Amazon and Mato Grosso regions, organized by CIMI (Conselho Indigenista Misionario), information was revealed that the Ministry of Mining and Energy will build 400 new hydroelectric dams by the year 2015. Many of them will flood large areas of forest lands belonging to indigenous communities.

Additionally, the degradation and destruction of vast areas of the Amazon forest by fires has continued throughout 1998. Both degradation and elimination of forests will contribute to accelerate global warming. Research carried out by the Instituto de Pesquisa Ambiental da Amazonia –an NGO based in Belem, in northern Brazil- and the Woods Hole Research Center, based in Massachusetts, had predicted that approximately 400,000 square kilometres of the Brazilian Amazon would become vulnerable to fire during the 1998 dry season. The unusually low amounts of rainfall in 1998 have increased the area of fire-vulnerable forest to more than one million square kilometres, or one third of the Amazonian forest. However, the degradation of forests burnt and left standing is not included in the government's monitoring program, that only considers total burning and clearcutting as deforestation and therefore official figures hide significant amounts of carbon released through partial burning of forests.

In relation to climate change, these results are important for the estimation of carbon emissions from Amazonian forests associated with land use practices: the partial burning of standing forest can release 10 to 80% of forest biomass to the atmosphere as carbon dioxide. Such large amounts of carbon dioxide are not included in current estimates of carbon emissions from Amazonia. On the other hand, according to a computer model programme run by Centre Hadley for Climate Change and presented at the COP4, if the destruction of the Amazon forest continues at the present rate, vast areas of tropical forests are menaced of becoming deserts by the year 2050. This would mean -among many other things- the loss of the largest carbon reservoir in the world.

Forest fires are enhanced by the selective removal of trees, which allows the sun's rays to reach the forest soil and to create a dry and prone to fire environment. The Brazilian Institute for the Environment (IBAMA) recently revealed that logging companies have illegally extracted US\$ 70 million worth of mahogany from the Kaiapo indigenous peoples' territory in southern Para province and it has also accused 16 local sawmills of theft and falsification of documentation. IBAMA has been carrying out a number of actions to curb illegal logging in the Amazon, which will probably be discontinued as a result of a 47.4% cut in the budget of the Ministry of the Environment. The Amazonian Working Group (Grupo de Trabalho Amazonico), composed by 355 Brazilian NGOs, has recently denounced a 90% reduction in the resources devoted to projects to be implemented in the Amazon and Mata Atlantica regions, and sent messages to the Parliament trying to stop the budget

reductions proposed by the Federal Government.

The Brazilian government's international discourse on the importance of the Amazon forest in relation with climate change therefore seems to have little in common with what is actually happening in the real forest.

Sources: “Estudo preve desertificacao na Amazonia”, Estado de Sao Paulo, 4/11/98; “Aquecimento global deve criar desertos na Amazonia”, Jornal da Tarde, 4/11/98; Woods Hole Research Center , “Flames in the Amazon forest: carbon emissions go up”, E. Melloni & A. Galvao, “Ibama prepara reduçao dos custos fixos”, Estado de Sao Paulo, 5/11/98; Information Bulletin for the Buenos Aires Conference, 11/11/98; CIMI, 16/11/98 and 23/11/98; Resenha Ambiental Ecopress, 24/11/98.