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## Brazil: will forest destruction be sponsored by the law?

As everybody knows, Brazil is one of the richest countries in the world regarding forests. Additionally to the Amazon, whose major area is located in the Brazilian territory, there are in Brazil other valuable forest ecosystems, such as the mata atlantica and the cerrado, or ecosystems with an important presence of trees, as the pantanal and the caatinga. In spite of that, as everybody also knows, forest biodiversity in that country is seriously menaced by a seemingly uncontrollable process of plundering and destruction.

In several international fora on environment and development, the Brazilian authorities have tried to appear as championing the cause of Southern countries. Nevertheless, its position regarding domestic issues is completely different. Last November 23 the government presented to the National Congress a Forestry Act bill which, if passed, would further increase the already serious process of deforestation and forest degradation which affects the country. The project was presented openly ignoring the authority of the Technical Committee of CONAMA (National Environmental Council), which had been specifically created to review the 1965 Forestry Act, and which aimed at making democratic participation of all stakeholders possible. The government has instead opted to take the shortcut and has made an agreement with the powerful National Agricultural Council (Consejo Nacional de Agricultura) which represents the big landowners.

Among the changes introduced by the new project, the following can be highlighted: agricultural plots of less than 20 hectares are not obliged to maintain a forest reserve area, which means the future death of the scanty remains of the mata atlantica forest, most of which are distributed in less than 20-hectare patches; eucalyptus and pine plantations in small plots in the Amazon and the Pantanal regions are considered "forest reserves"; woodlands can be converted to agriculture without previous permission of the environmental authority. Those changes are not only detrimental to the forest heritage of the country, but also strengthen the already hegemonic lobby of big landowners, whose actions are linked to the worse of Brazil's political, social and environmental history. The murder of Chico Mendes, whose anniversary is remembered once again this December, is perhaps the most well-known, though not the unique, example. Unfortunately, the Brazilian government seems more interested in counting on the support of the National Agricultural Council -formed by a few but very powerful people- than in protecting the country's ecosystems and its people.

The project has been halted in Parliament as a result of the rapid action of environmental NGOs and to the position adopted by the opposition party. Nevertheless, it is feared that the Forestry Act bill can be passed in the near future. If you want to collaborate to avoid that, you are invited to visit:

<http://www.socioambiental.org/noticias/brasil/campanha.html>

where you can endorse a letter addressed to the president of Brazil, the Minister of the Environment and representatives of Brazilian political parties in parliament.

Source: Sandra Tosta Faillace, 29/11/99;

