

EX TROPICIS

ENVIRONMENTAL NEWS



Spot News

Week of January 30 to february 6, 1992

ENVIRONMENT

Two hundred tons of toxic mercury

The Rondônia state government revealed February 3 that the 1,000-kilometer Madeira River region's inhabitants are contaminated by mercury. Biologist Ana Amélia Boischio from the University of Rondônia has confirmed that her findings show traces of mercury in hair samples submitted for testing. Fish in the area also tested positive for mercury.

The concentration of mercury found was 50 parts per million; the World Health Organization states that this level is enough to cause motor coordination alterations, hearing problems and slurred speech. A slightly higher level leads to blindness and birth defects.

The state's Environmental Development Secretary said that 200 tons of mercury have been released into two Rondônia rivers, the Madeira and the Mamoré, in the last ten years. What he failed to mention was the source: illegal gold mining the government has failed to halt throughout the country.

Atlantic coastal rain forest conservation

The Sao Paulo State Environment Secretary, Alaor Alves, announced January 30 the allocation of some US\$ 538,000 to conservation organizations in the Vale do Ribeira region in the southwestern part of the state. Alves, however, is not in favor of maintaining the current policy set out by the federal government which forbids timber and native species exploration in the Atlantic coastal rain forest. He has signed an agreement with a local inter-municipal development council to carry out an environmental macro-zoning study of the region to determine where it is sound to allow sustainable forest exploration.

NATIVE ISSUES

Attempt to check fatal cholera

The Rondônia State Commission on Cholera has announced that over 1,000 people on five indigenous areas in the state are in danger of cholera contamination due to lack of adequate hygiene. Health authorities have begun a training program for nurses and nurses' aids who will be working in the area of disease prevention and control at 12 Federal Indian Agency (Funai) health posts in the state. The program's goal is to prevent cholera spreading among native peoples.

ATOMIC WEAPONS

Bombs not in the works...

Brazilian Minister of the Navy claimed February 2 that the government, "has no program to develop an atomic bomb during its term in office." According to the minister, there is no plan underway to proceed with nuclear projects that have military purposes.

A military spokesman within the government, however, commented that the ostensible goal of the Army's project is to produce electric energy through graphite reactors. He pointed out that the U.S. and the former Soviet Union developed their nuclear programs based on the same graphite reactor system and their objective was to produce bombs. Although the Army Research Center has denied the rumors, the question still remains why the Army was chosen to work on electricity generation programs.

NUCLEAR

Angra II plant - another white elephant?

Despite criticism from such widespread camps such as environmentalists and government economists, the federal government is going ahead with the Angra II nuclear plant. Officials have announced it will be operational within three years. The project, begun 15 years ago, has already cost US\$ 4.1 billion and an additional US\$ 1.25 billion is needed to finish the plant. Losses resulting from the project's delays have amounted to a resounding US\$ 2.2 billion. The federal government stated January 30 that it is negotiating with the German government for further investments.

Christian Klose, manager of German-owned equipment manufacturer Kraft Werk Union (KWU), has disclosed that credit to the tune of US\$ 700 million has already been guaranteed by German banks and that the deal has German government backing. US\$ 40 million of this sum will be spent in 1992.

If completed, Angra II will go down in history as the most expensive nuclear plant of its size ever built. Its predecessor, Angra I, has been severely criticized because of poor construction, astronomical costs and alleged corruption in awarding contracts; U.S.-owned Westinghouse built part of the plant and obsolete German technology was used. Flawed security measures continue to cause concern; there have been only two evacuation drills carried out at the plant in the last five years. A government spokesman has stated that forthcoming Angra III might have to be put on hold due to lack of funds.

AMAZON INTERNATIONALIZATION

President Collor is worried about foreign meddling

Ongoing debate on the so-called "internationalization" of the Amazon has succeeded in upsetting President Collor, who has been accusing foreigners of interference. Last week, Collor received a dossier compiled by military advisors on activities of foreign ecological organizations. The report contained an article published in a German magazine which tells of a Dutch environmentalist group's efforts to sign up Europeans to go save the Amazon from purported destruction by the Army.

The magazine accused the Army of destroying 150 square kilometers of native rain forest in the state of Amazonas. The publication alleges that 5,000 soldiers are cutting down trees there. An annoyed Armed Forces spokesman has confirmed that the information in the article is false. He emphasized that the Army has a total of 10,000 soldiers in the Amazon, but spread out over five huge states.

UNCED-92

Northern countries donate to NGO conference

The Global Forum, a wide variety of conferences, exhibitions and workshops to be staged by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) parallel to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) has received a total donation of US\$ 200,000 from several northern countries. "The Forum is still US\$ 150,000 short of the required US\$ 350,000," confirmed Listzt Viera, one of the coordinators of the International Work Group, the executive committee that is organizing the 12-day Global Forum, to be held in Rio de Janeiro in June.

During the Forum, this executive committee plans to propose the creation of an alternative NGO "world bank" and a technology bank. The NGOs are also working out the details of setting up a satellite communications network that will remain for community use after the conference ends.

Celebrities such as South African Bishop Desmond Tutu, Great Britain's Prince Charles and the Dalai Lama of Tibet have confirmed their participation in the Forum.