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AMAZON PACKAGE

FHC's government takes its first consistent steps in the environmental area

The so-called Amazon package, made public on July 25, improves upon the legislation to protect the Legal Amazon's natural resources. It is the most solid environmental measure adopted thus far by FHC's Government.

The package manifests itself as a decree and as a provisional measure, and combines a series of legal devices to curb the deforestation and predatory logging exploration in the Amazon region:

establishes a two year moratorium for new mahogany and virola logging authorizations and concessions; determines the revision, with an established deadline, of the current authorizations and concessions to explore mahogany and virola, and includes the cancellation of irregular situations. conditions new logging authorizations to those effectively and adequately utilizing areas already converted into agricultural lands. Thus, properties with degraded areas, under utilized or inadequately utilized will not be able to receive authorization for new clearings; and, increases the legal reserve's figure from 50% to 80%, in cases where the area is fitofisionomia forest. For example, forest and savannah clearing in Legal Amazonian properties can only occur in up to 20% of these areas. This will signify in an effective increase in the total percentage of protected forest formations. Using the hypothesis of a property entirely covered by forest, the legal reserve would have to be necessarily 80%.

These measures attend old claims from the Brazilian environmental movement. However, they generate some doubts that require government clarification.

Agricultural and cattle raising productive ventures, in already converted areas, head toward a preferential status in obtaining official credits and incentives. It remains unknown whether the measure applies only to those which completed the conversion in a legal way, such as, duly authorized and in accordance with the environmental demands relative to soil use, or if it will pertain to all. In the case where the second interpretation is adopted, those who illegally deforest areas will be rewarded.

The package generates expectations in the viability of its implementation. Inspections are anticipated in the issue of current authorized revisions. It remains unknown, however, if it deals with local inspections of approved projects or simply cabinet analysis with relation to the probable formal irregularities. The measure's success and the very credibility of the Decree depend upon the realization of in loco inspections, to verify the actual situation of the processes that do not represent formal irregularities. Thus, it is difficult to believe that a structure exists for this, even more so when one considers the established 60 day deadline.

There are also questions on the prevision of carrying out studies to create national forests. This would be linked to facts recently reported by the press with relation to the government's intention to utilize Amazonian areas to implement the country's agrarian reform, or, does it merely deal with a way to compensate the regional population for the restrictive measures contained in the package?

The context in which the package was launched merits analyzation too. The justifications presented by the federal government are based upon the annual deforestation statistics in the Amazon forest, ranging from 0.3% to 0.4% in the 1992-1994 period. (1995 data is nonexistent, although according to nonofficial sources, it appears this study is in its final stage). The measures were defined a short period prior to Brazil's Tropical Forest Conservation evaluation meeting, taking place in Germany, and Amazon Week, in New York, both meetings scheduled for September, and occasions where Brazil's regional governmental policies will be the object of critical attention by public opinion and by the international press.

In this scenario, the speculations, that the government would release information that points to an aggravation of deforestation in the Amazon in 1995, seem to bear truth, which would have brought them to anticipate the possible stream of critiques which they would have received in the international events. If this is confirmed, once again, Brazilian environmental policies are defined as an object to spare the country's image abroad, instead of resulting in an internal process of improvement. Contributing to this suspicion is the fact that the National Environmental Board's (Conselho Nacional do Meio Ambiente, CONAMA) meeting, scheduled for August 31, was canceled the week after the package was published, with the justification that there were no relevant topics for discussion.

It is evident, however, that these doubts do not diminish the merit of the package. Within the package, there are effective advances, which added to the other norms of protection in the Amazon Basin that were not revoked, as the case of decree 1,282 from 10/19/94, which conditions forest clearing and other forms of vegetation to ecological and economic regional zoning, place the environmental legislation of the region upon a superior

platform.