



# THE GREAT BRAZILIAN LAND GRAB

*How the military promotes  
the wholesale murder of Indians  
and the devastation of land  
in the Amazon.*

BY PENNY LERNOUX

**“TAKE WHAT YOU CAN and get out,”** shouted the policeman. “I’m going to burn down the house!”  
Carmelita Xavier remembers rushing out of her home with a few belongings as the flames leaped up the walls. Her husband Florivaldo lay on the ground in front of the shack, shot in the foot; the children had scattered in the bush. “They destroyed the house and everything in it and all our rice and bean plantings. My husband was taken prisoner. It’s the second time in two years that we’ve been thrown out.”  
The Naviers form part of a group of sixty-four peasant families who homesteaded farms in Cacoal in the Pôrto Velho region of Brazil’s western Amazon forests. The land in question is claimed

by an army captain, one Antonio Domingos Sanson, who lives in the distant city of São Paulo. As a member of the military Sanson has access to automatic pistols and machine guns, the sort used by the paid gunslingers and local police who drove the families from their farms.  
The Cacoal settlers’ story is a familiar one in Latin America, where force is frequently used to evict peasants from public lands coveted by military officials and politically powerful ranchers. But the scale of rural violence in the Brazilian Amazon has no equal in South America: Tens of thousands of people are engaged in a land war in one of the last great frontier rushes of the century. It is more like an invasion than an occupation, with armies of paid killers and corrupt policemen advancing through the jungle, vanquishing Indian tribes and peasant settlers in the best conquistador tradition. “The only laws in the

Amazon,” observes a Brazilian bishop, “are those of murderers and thieves.”  
Even the air is polluted with violence. For as far as the eye can see, curtains of smoke hang over the jungle where men have put torch to the trees. Where the fires stop, a vast, gray desert begins, extending to the red plains of Brasilia, the capital of Brazil. A decade ago, the desert was jungle. The enormity of the rape boggles the imagination: At the present rate of destruction, an area nearly the size of the United States will be stripped of its forest reserves in less than two decades. The environment is fast falling victim to the same predatory forces that are decimating Indians and smallholders in the Amazon.  
Although the Amazon has long been prey for marauders, official support for its invasion dates from 1964, when the military seized the government. By the end of the decade, the regime had firmly

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established a system in which the military and their civilian allies grew richer, while most others suffered progressive impoverishment. One of the cornerstones of the system was a 1964 land statute that redistributed land to large ranchers and agribusinesses. It forced small farmers to pay twenty times the taxes of the large landowners and gave government subsidies to the latter to increase their holdings. The statute was a historical extension of earlier land laws that had been designed to supply Brazil's large plantations with cheap labor—following the abolition of slavery in

São Paulo and foreign-owned agribusinesses dedicated exclusively to export products like cattle and lumber.

**T**HE "GREEN RUSH" BEGAN in earnest in 1970, when President Emilio Garrastazú Médici, the then reigning general, shifted from laissez-faire to an aggressive policy of development—specifically the construction of the Transamazonian Highway that crossed 3400 miles of riparian territory from the Atlantic Ocean to Brazil's frontier with Peru. An additional 6000 miles of roads

Amazon properties are conserved as virgin forest. But with such an immense area to monitor and limited resources and personnel, the IBDF does not initiate actions; it only responds to complaints, determining their validity and, if appropriate, fining the offender. Such complaints early became a tool of land speculators and large landowners for expropriating the farms of small migrants, since a legal hole in the IBDF regulations leaves the migrants virtually defenseless. In order to receive a permit to clear the land, the homesteader must first obtain a license from INCRA; this license, in turn, is issued only to those who already have "improvements" on their land—which necessarily entails first clearing at least some portion of the land.

As a study by the University of Florida shows, it soon became "a simple matter for the ranchers and speculators to denounce small farmers to the IBDF, which applies an astronomical fine to the offender, who is then forced to abandon his land, leaving it to the other parties in the conflict." The study reports that in most cases the colonists did observe the limits on burning and clearing laid down by the IBDF, if not always to the precise inch. In contrast, no action has ever been taken against large landowners who grossly ignore such limits. Volkswagen, for example, which owns a 287,000-acre cattle ranch in the Amazon, was never fined for burning off its legally required forest reserve. This favoritism stems in part from the central government's need for a rationale to rid the region of small farmers. Blaming the victim is standard procedure for the military government in Brazil, where official statistics are frequently rigged to suit the generals' interests, and any questioning of this procedure is immediately labeled "communist subversion."

The government thus cited "national security" in banning the Tropical Biology Association's fifth international symposium in Brazil in 1979; its topic of debate was to have been the Amazon. Explained General Tasso Villar de Aquino, who is in charge of the federal environment secretariat for the Amazon, "There is nothing more to be learned about the Amazon."

In recent years, the government has perpetuated the principle that big is beautiful by providing more than two-thirds of the investment in the large Amazon ranches. Often the money is used for speculation: In the state of Acre, on the Bolivian border, land values have increased 20,000 times since 1972 despite the lack of cultivation. "I know

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1888—by preventing farm workers from acquiring their own parcels. But because of technological advances in farm mechanization, most of the farmers forced into the labor pool by the 1964 law could find no work on the large estates, so millions of tenant and small farmers had to abandon their homes in search of jobs. In the northeast alone, some 6.5 million people joined the migration to the cities. Over two decades, 37.5 million people from all parts of the country went on the move, unprecedented in a nation where strong family and regional ties discourage mobility.

The forced exodus led to social disaster, swelling overcrowded slums and destroying a family-farm economy that traditionally had provided more than half of Brazil's food. Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, attracting the largest numbers of migrants, paid for the privilege with soaring crime rates and deteriorating health and other public services. Government demographers estimate that another 2.5 million migrants will descend on São Paulo in the coming decade.

With the industrial hubs of the southeast suffering from overpopulation and recession, large numbers of migrants are on the move again, this time to the Amazon. They have been joined by more millions from the northeastern and central regions. But the "promised land" has turned out to be just as troubled as the cities and villages from which they came, with the same poverty, or worse. Like much of Brazil the Amazon is, in the language of development economists, a "big man's frontier," and most of the "big men" are land speculators or

were to crisscross the Amazon basin, many passing through Indian lands. Unaccustomed to thinking small, the Brazilian government envisioned the resettlement of 30 million peasants in the Amazon, mostly in the regions where roads were under construction. Some 8000 colonists were actually moved into the region.

In their short life, the settlements were plagued by countless bureaucratic snafus. Typical was the experience of colonists in the Marabá region in the southern part of Pará state, who, on orders of the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA), planted a rice seed developed in the northeastern part of Brazil but never tested in the Amazon. The seed was not suited to the area, and yields were low and of poor quality. Heavily indebted to the state bank for financing of the first rice crop, the peasants could neither repay the bank nor obtain further loans to finance the next rice planting, and many abandoned the settlement. Those who hung on and planted other rice seeds adapted to the environment quadrupled yields, but by that time the government had already decided that small farmers were unproductive. A year after the first crop, the military, under pressure from Brazilian and foreign interests, cut off their financial support.

Peasant homesteaders have also been faced with criticism as "predatory occupiers" of the environment. This claim is based on charges lodged against the peasants with the Brazilian Institute for Forest Development (IBDF), which is supposed to ensure that 50 percent of all

owner of a fleet of trucks and buses in Brasilia, "but I bought two Amazon ranches to double my money in a couple of years."

The road program has similarly served land speculators, even though many of the roads are unusable or still on paper. The Transamazonian Highway, better known as the "Transmiseriana," was never completed and is impassable during the rainy season when wooden bridges spanning Amazon tributaries are flooded or washed away. But thanks to the road program, twenty-nine Indian tribes were decimated through contact with the white man and his diseases, or massacred by gunslings and police. Helio Campos, a former military officer who is a state deputy for the Amazon region of Roraima, speaks for many of his peers when he says that "we cannot afford the luxury of conserving half a dozen Indian tribes."

Like General Villar de Aquino, officials of the National Foundation for the Indian (FUNAI), led by an army colonel, frequently cite national security to rationalize the takeover of Indian lands that they are supposed to be protecting. On occasion the foundation has even certified the nonexistence of Indians in areas inhabited by tribes because the land was coveted by large landowners, often military officials. Such was the fate of the Nambiquara tribe in the western Amazon, whose lands were annexed by large cattle companies after FUNAI issued twenty-one clearance certificates. Road construction, pollution of river water, and spraying of Indian lands with a potent defoliant containing Agent Orange reduced the Nambiquara population from 10,000 to 530. These survivors will not last long, since the government is planning to separate them in minireserves sandwiched between the ranches and a new highway being financed by the World Bank.

National security is also cited to justify cutting a 100-mile wide swath through Yanomami tribal area to separate Yanomamis in Brazil from their brothers on the Venezuelan side of the frontier. But the real reason for breaking up their land is to permit the powerful state-owned mining company, Companhia Vale do Rio Doce, to mine tin ore deposits in the region. Brazil's last large primitive Indian tribe, the estimated 8400 Yanomamis will not survive the decade—say Brazilian anthropologists—if FUNAI and the governor of the region (an air force brigadier general) and

other influential military interests have their way. Says Dom Tomaz Balduino, the bishop of Goiás and a prominent member of the Catholic church's Indigenous Missionary Council: "The Indians are a challenge to the whole idea of development. Their way of life is communal. They instinctively respect the ecology. In the generals' eyes, what could be more subversive?"

The destruction of forest reserves grows apace with the takeover of Indian lands. About 10 percent of the jungle has been laid bare, but this is minor damage compared to what is to come when foreign and local timber companies begin to "mine" the jungle for commercial lumber much as foreign oil companies

explore for petroleum. The "mining" is done by bulldozers or huge tractors that drag 52,800-pound chains through the forest, pulling up everything by the roots. Under pending legislation, the IBDF will sell off one-fifth of surviving forest reserves, in hopes that lumber exports will help service Brazil's \$60 billion foreign debt. Given the IBDF's proven inability to control large-scale cutting, the 20 percent limit for forest destruction will probably go the way of the 50 percent limit on forest destruction on Amazon cattle ranches.

The fertility of the Amazon's thin soils depends almost entirely on a nutrient-rich cover of vegetation, so clear-cutting destroys the timeless process of recy-





ing, leaving behind a lifeless shell. Says Harry Knowles, a former United Nations ecologist who has spent twenty years in the Amazon, "At the present rate, they could end up creating another Sahara." Scientists also worry about the global warming effect of large quantities of carbon dioxide released into the atmosphere by mass burning of Amazon forests. Their worst-case scenario foresees a two-degree rise in average temperature over the next seventy years, which would melt the polar icecaps and raise sea levels more than twenty feet. Gary Hartshorn, a U.S. forestry expert who has visited U.S. billionaire Daniel K. Ludwig's enormous Amazon spread, says that the annual burning of native forest on Ludwig's property "is so intense and immense that it produces its own weather—severe thunderstorms some four miles downwind from the conflagration."

Ludwig's ranch, which is as large as the states of Connecticut and Massachusetts combined, is but one of dozens of huge Amazon estates owned by multinational corporations like BRASCAN, Swift Armour, King Ranch, Heublein, Mitsui, Volkswagen, and others. The lure of Amazon cattle ranching is summed up by the environmental writer Norman Myers: "Volkswagen believes that although people may come to purchase fewer cars in the wake of oil price hikes, they will hardly be inclined to eat less beef."

Using the force of the government and their own private armies, foreign and Brazilian cattle ranchers are squeezing out migrant settlers, even those who have farmed the land for over two decades and hold INCRA titles. Some of the dispossessed live in mud wattle houses in jungle slums on the edge of polluted rivers. Others drift up and

a herd of jobless men in rural areas or on the fringes of the cities for seasonal work on distant ranches. Usually these laborers have no identity papers and so no legal rights. Pay is good by the standards of rural Brazil—\$135 a month on Ludwig's Jari estate, for example. The catch is the old historical ploy: Everything must be purchased from the high-priced company store, to which the worker is always indebted. Pedro da Conceição, a young laborer from the northeast, reported that at the end of a year at Jari all he had to show for his earnings were two pairs of pants. "Everything belongs to Jari, even the whorehouses," he said. "If you want to eat, have a woman, or buy an aspirin, you have to pay the company store, and there's never any money left at the end of the month. Except for Christmas, there are no days off; no Sundays, no holidays. We live in the bush, exposed to the weather, fever, every kind of sickness. Only the Americans and a few Brazilians live in the nice houses on the hill [Monte Dourado]."

Conditions at Jari are by no means the worst. On some estates, workers have been murdered for trying to escape. The police rarely investigate since, as one large rancher boasted, "I can buy any policeman in the state for five dollars." Fugitive laborers are considered criminals for attempting to "steal" contracted labor from the estate owner or the "cat." This legal bind also applies to men purchased from Amazon jails by the "cats" who pay off lodging costs owed by the prisoners. (Under Amazon law prisoners are not freed until they pay for their keep, even if they have served their full sentences.) In the region of Xingu, in a place appropriately called São João de Bang Bang, laborers routinely are whipped for things like lagging in their work.

Amazonia. "Besides, I spent all the money I had to get here, so this is it."

**S**INCE THE LAND RUSH began, the focus of rural violence has shifted to the Amazon. Statistics compiled by the Pastoral Commission on Land (CPT) of the National Conference of Brazilian Bishops show that 82 percent of all land conflicts in Brazil in the past three years occurred in the Amazon. Some 75,000 people were involved in the conflicts, half of which ended in murder. It is indicative of the scale of the violence that some 300 men and women were massacred in September 1979 by gunmen in the pay of a land company owned by a São Paulo businessman. The victims were among more than 3000 gold prospectors and their families who were ordered off company property in the Alta Floresta region of Mato Grosso state. As they left they were attacked by the gunmen, who stole their gold, raped the women, and murdered indiscriminately.

So institutionalized are violence and corruption that there is actually a hierarchy of thugs, as well as a standardized code for bribes. At the top are the *grileiros*, or land grabbers, usually São Paulo businessmen or important military or political figures in the Amazon states. Below them are several classes of gunmen, the most important being the *pistoleiros*—as well as the local and military police. The most famous *pistoleiros* go by such flamboyant names as the "Divine One" and the "Green Devil." The average price per murder is \$192, according to church sources, but may vary according to how many people the gunman previously killed.

Bribes are measured in food—for example, a *cafezinho*, or small coffee, for a trifle; a *lanche*, or snack, for a medium-sized bribe; and an *almooço*, or breakfast, for a large one. Government notaries usually charge a *lanche* to doctor property deeds, some of which are so poorly forged that they describe mountains, rivers, and other landmarks several hundred miles from their real location. Other deeds on file with CPT offices have been ironed to make them look yellow with age. It is typical of the wild and corrupt speculation that, according to the governor's office, 50 percent more land was sold in the state of Mato Grosso than actually exists.

Dom Celso Pereira, the bishop of Pôrto Nacional, says that there is at least one murder a day in his district. He himself has been threatened by the large

## *Clear-cutting destroys the fertility of the Amazon's thin soils, leaving behind a lifeless shell. Brazil 'could end up creating another Sahara,' says a United Nations ecologist.*

down the red clay roads searching for a piece of unclaimed jungle or a job on the large ranches. By comparison with the Amazon's poverty and violence, the slums of Rio and São Paulo seem civilized: However bad conditions in the cities, there is some recourse to the law; in the Amazon there is no law.

At the bottom of the Amazon social scale is the poor migrant, enticed by a labor contractor or "cat" who rounds up

Because the conditions of peonage are tantamount to slavery, many Amazon settlers are prepared to die fighting for their small plot of land rather than join the jobless hordes drifting from one jungle slum to the next. The peasants are keenly aware that the Amazon is Brazil's last frontier. "I'm too old to move again," explained a forty-year-old peasant who had migrated from the northeast to Pará state, in central

landowners for taking the side of the peasant settlers: "As I constantly speak against violence, the ranchers accuse me of being a communist. The things that go on around here would make any normal person cry." The bishop cites a typical case of thirty families who have farmed an area known as São João for nearly three decades: "Last year a São Paulo lawyer arrived, claiming he owned the land. He had some documents which he said were land titles, but he wouldn't let the settlers examine them. When the peasants refused to leave, he sent three *pistoleiros* to threaten them, saying they had two days to leave. A few days later he appeared with a court order of expulsion from a corrupt judge, and more *pistoleiros*, who burned the homes and crops of four families. The lawyer and the *pistoleiros* returned again, but this time a group of twelve armed settlers met them, saying they were willing to discuss the situation but not under threats. The *pistoleiros* ignored them, tearing down the settlers' fences and invading houses. When they tried to burn one, the settlers fired on them, and two of the *pistoleiros* were injured; one of them later died. Before he died, the man confessed that he had received \$200 from the lawyer for his part in the raid. He was carrying false police documents.

"There is a standoff at the moment, but only God knows what will happen. The police took away the arms of the peasants and the *pistoleiros* and the landowners, but recently they were returned to the landowners with licenses from the Justice Ministry. We don't understand this."

**A**LTHOUGH HEAVILY weighted in the large ranchers' favor, the land war in the Amazon is not entirely one-sided: The settlers and Indians have a powerful ally in the Brazilian Catholic church, the only institution to talk back to the military during seventeen years of dictatorship. Despite arrests, torture, even murder, the embattled bishops of the Amazon have been sponsoring an impressive network of rural support based on the twin priorities of organized action, as in rural unions and peasant church groups, and legal defense, a particularly effective weapon in a society where peasants normally have no money for a lawyer and are too cowed to take a large landowner to court. The most challenging aspect of this church-backed rural movement is its links with labor unions in the big cities, like the powerful metal workers' union in São

Paulo. An example of what such unity can achieve was recently provided by cane-cutters in the northeast, who staged the biggest strike in rural Brazil since 1964. Supported by the São Paulo metal workers, the strikers obtained twenty-six concessions, including higher wages and better working conditions.

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Both the Amazon cattle ranchers and the military have reacted to the threat. Rural labor leaders are being picked off: In recent months the head of the militant peasant movement in Conceição do Araguaia, in southern Pará state, and his counterpart in Brasília, in Acre, were killed. According to Father Henrique Marques da Silva, the vicar general of Conceição, the region's large landowners held a meeting in Brasília shortly before the men's murder. They drew up a death list that included four priests in the Conceição diocese, the vicar general among them. "They said I was to be taken out in a sack," he reported. Earlier, the head of the Conceição diocese and the vice-president of the Conceição CPT were hauled before a military court for interrogation. Nicola Arpone, an Italian pastoral agent active in church-supported rural unions, was kidnapped from a village in a military helicopter, held three days nude and blindfolded, beaten, and finally released in a distant city. The purpose of the kidnapping and the interrogations, said Bishop Pereira, president of the regional CPT, was to discourage support for rural unions.

The Amazon church believes a similar motive was behind the death of the bishop of Imperatriz, Dom Marceio Bicego, a vigorous, middle-aged Italian who met a sudden, convulsive end earlier last year. Circumstantial evidence has convinced several leading prelates that Bicego was poisoned. The bishop was strongly criticized by large landowners in the region for defending the rights of a group of settlers. After his death the settlers were evicted from their land. On other occasions the military has even resorted to bombing rebellious peasant villages, as in the attack on the river beach of São Sebastião de Tocantins.

Despite police and military repression, the land struggle has not been resolved, particularly in still untitled areas

of Amazon settlement like Conceição de Araguaia, where peasant colonists have taken up machetes and rifles to defend themselves against hired gunmen. Unlike other areas of the Amazon, the Araguaia region has a tradition of peasant resistance, dating from a brief, ill-fated guerrilla war in 1972-73. Although most

of the guerrillas' peasant supporters were resettled in the equivalent of a rural concentration camp, Brazil's generals are convinced that another insurrection is brewing, this time armed by the Catholic church. The government has recently attempted to "pacify" Araguaia by handing out a few land titles to cooperative peasants whose land is to be a protective barrier around the large estates to prevent further homesteading. But so far the scheme has not succeeded because the peasants refuse to be coopted by the government.

In the end, the Amazon's fate will not be settled in the jungles, but in the cities of coastal Brazil, where political and economic power are concentrated. President João Baptista Figueiredo has initiated a tentative "opening" to political liberties, and the country is now at a crossroads: It can return to the repressiveness of the past or move gingerly toward a restoration of democracy.

Much depends on Brazil's economic outlook, which at the moment is bleak due to heavy dependence on imported oil, galloping inflation, and the Third World's highest foreign debt. Informed Brazilian sources believe that if more intransigent members of the military force Figueiredo to abandon his opening, the labor unions in the cities will come under attack, which will weaken their links to the church-supported peasant organizations in the Amazon. Even the most optimistic script—say, a controlled democracy within three years—affords little hope for the environment or the Indians, given the scope and pace of the onslaught on the Amazon, the traditional venality of Brazil's bureaucracy (whether civilian or military), and the general indifference of Brazilians to what happens in the backlands. But the drama of the Indians, the irreparable loss of the forests, and the suffering of almost seven million landless peasants are the tragedy of an entire nation. □