



No hectare left behind!

Letter from the Climate Observatory protesting the attack on environmental protection in Brazil

Forces within the Brazilian government and Congress are taking advantage of the current political instability to tear down socio-environmental legislation and policies that have been in place since the 1988 Constitution. A concerted effort is underway to pass a series of measures that put at risk the safety and wellbeing of Brazilian society and Brazil's climate change commitments under the Paris Agreement.

On Tuesday April 11th, a Congressional committee declared open season on a number of protected areas in the Amazon and the Atlantic Forest, removing protections for 660 thousand hectares of public land that was being illegally occupied and clearcut for pasture. This unprecedented reduction of protected areas had been originally proposed by President Michel Temer himself, through provisional Executive Order [*Medida Provisória*] number 756. On Wednesday April 12th, the committee took a mere 7 minutes to pass Provisional Order 758, laying waste to another 442 thousand hectares of protected areas in Amazonia. In two days, 1.1 million hectares of Amazon forest were fated for destruction.

The recourse to executive orders as an instrument to reduce protected areas was first attempted by former President Dilma Rousseff and now is being perfected by President Temer. It is a signal from government that in today's Brazil environmental crime pays. It is encouraging agribusiness interests and their congressional allies to advance proposals aiming at eliminating or reducing the protections given to national parks, extractive reserves (conservation areas that permit sustainable use of the forest) and other protected areas. In the most recent assault, politicians from Amazonas state are plotting with the President's Chief of Staff to remove protection from 1 million hectares of conservation areas in the south of the state. The national Congress and several state legislatures are considering several other proposals with similar goals.

President Temer has also issued Provisional Executive Order 759/2016, which under the pretext of formally recognizing land tenure, in fact incentivizes land grabs, perpetuates urban and rural chaos, increased deforestation and further concentration of land and wealth in the hands of a few.

Those moves are happening in the midst of soaring deforestation rates in the Amazon. The speed of deforestation has increased by 60% over the last two years, putting in risk Brazil's goal of 80% reduction from historical levels by 2020 and putting into question Brazil's commitment to the Paris Agreement.

Other types of protected areas are also threatened. President Temer has nominated as Justice Minister a hard-line member of the agribusiness caucus, Osmar Serraglio, a Congressman from the state of Paraná and a member of Temer's party, PMDB. Serraglio was a key supporter of a Constitutional Amendment that undermines indigenous rights by transferring the power to settle indigenous land claims from the President to Congress. Since FUNAI, the government agency that administers land claims, is

subordinated to the Justice ministry, by making someone as clearly biased as Serraglio the Minister of Justice, Temer is tipping the scales on a conflict that his government should mediate.

Today all processes related to land claims for indigenous and other traditional settlements and the creation of nature reserves and land redistribution are frozen. The recently introduced constitutional caps on government expenditures ushers in a long era of tight budgets for socio-environmental agencies and policies – starting with the recent 43% budget cut to the Environment ministry coinciding with a period of rising deforestation rates.

Along with the direct threats to protected areas and traditional territories, legislation to weaken environmental licensing rules for mining, hydroelectric and other projects may also come to a vote in the lower house over the coming days or weeks. The agribusiness lobby, along with the National Confederation of Industry (CNI), seeks to weaken the federal government role in environmental approvals, and leave it up to States and municipalities to define which activities need environmental licenses – with all agricultural activities being exempted. Should that proposition prevail, the risk of tragedies such as the 2015 Mariana dam disaster will increase. It would also pave the way for massive infrastructure projects – such as those under investigation for corruption by Operation Carwash – to be built with no impact assessment whatsoever.

In this context, the violence against youth, women, peasants and traditional peoples is increasing. In 2015 alone, 50 people were killed in conflicts over land and community rights. Brazil holds the world record for the number of socio-environmental activists murdered.

After seeing huge strides in curbing deforestation, settling indigenous land claims and creating protected areas – while maintaining strong economic growth, record grain harvests and job creation – Brazil now seems intent on turning back the clock to the 1980's, when it was a world pariah due to rural violence and the systematic destruction of its natural capital.

The country that proudly sells itself to the world as part of the solution to the climate crisis has become a problem once again. The same agriculture that is promoted as the most sustainable in the world is rooted in land grabs, denial of rights of smallholder farmers and traditional communities, and undermining of the country's domestic and international emission reduction commitments.

In this context, the Brazilian Climate Observatory repudiates attacks on Brazil's heritage and societal rights by policymakers based on short-term private interests. We call on Congress to scrap any and all proposals for weakening protections or eliminating protected areas, such as Provisional Executive Orders # 756 and 758, or other measures that undermine social and environmental protection. We urge the President to abandon any further Executive measures aimed weakening or reducing protected areas and to veto the recent Congressional proposals, should they pass. We support social movements and NGOs that are currently joining forces to stand up to the crackdown. We are certain that only organized and growing resistance will enable us to stop and revert the ill tide that stirs in Brazil right now.

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