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AP Laserphoto

Irreparable damage

The clearing of trees in the Amazon region of Brazil often leaves behind a scarred area subject to desert-like conditions. International pressure is mounting on Brazil to preserve the rain forests.

World concern increasing over loss of rain forests

RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil (AP) — International pressure is mounting on Brazil to preserve its fast-disappearing Amazon rain forest, but the debt-ridden South American nation continues to resist what it considers to be foreign meddling.

There is growing concern worldwide that destruction of the 2 million-square-mile rain forest, the world's largest and fastest-disappearing, could change global weather with potentially disastrous consequences.

Satellite photos of the Amazon show that in the past 10 years, an area the size of Belgium has been slashed, burned and mined away. About 9 percent of the region is irreparably damaged, said researcher Philip M. Fearnside.

But ecologists charge that the government has done little to discourage uncontrolled destruction.

In January, a U.S. congressional delegation led by Sen. Timothy Wirth, D-Colo., met with President Jose Sarney to discuss swapping part of Brazil's \$115 billion debt for preserving Amazon land. France and the Netherlands have made similar proposals, involving creating an international commission to oversee the forest that covers two-thirds of Brazil and is home to 15 million people.

All received the same answer — Brazil won't be told what to do.

"We can't turn the Amazon into a sort of national park for humanity. Our priority is economic development. We're open to international suggestions but not those that interfere in Brazilian sovereignty," Foreign Minister Roberto de Abreu Sodre said recently.

"We can't be condemned to having a large part of our territory prevented from being de-

veloped, particularly when the developed world is responsible for the world's greatest ecological disasters," said Deputy Foreign Minister Paulo Tarso Flecha de Lima.

Over the past two decades, the government has given cattle ranchers tax breaks and other indirect subsidies totaling about \$2 billion, even though studies show most of the Amazon is unsuited to ranching or farming.

The tropical soil is extremely fragile. When the protective forest canopy is burned, nutrients wash away in the heavy rains.

"A typical field won't stand more than two crops, and a cattle pasture lasts not more than a decade," said Fearnside, a professor at the Amazonia Research Institute in Manaus, the principal Amazon city. "Only about 15 percent of the Amazon soil is suitable for conventional farming."

In addition, much of the land has been cleared and burned by farmers and by land speculators hoping for a better price for homesteaded property, he said.

Satellite photos of thousands of fires set by farmers and developers drew world attention last year, as did the December slaying of internationally known ecologist Francisco "Chico" Mendes.

The leader of a local rubber tappers union, Mendes fought to keep ranchers from cutting down the jungle for pasture. He had called for more harvesting of Amazon resources such as nuts, latex and plants, while preserving the trees.

Four people, including the son of a rancher, have been arrested.

In a nation where 60 percent of the people survive on less than \$90 a month, ecologists and politicians argue that the

Amazon has not created enough jobs to justify the destruction and its future consequences.

"The idea that you tear down the rain forest to create jobs is not sound," Wirth said. "To send a lot of people out there to settle the Amazon just doesn't work."

In the 1920s, auto magnate Henry Ford failed in a scheme to cultivate rubber trees in a vast area now known as "Fordlandia." Decades later, in the 1960s and '70s, shipping magnate Daniel Ludwig lost a reported \$1 billion in an ambitious plan to produce wood pulp and rice on the Amazon's Jari River.

"Vast areas of the Amazon have been devastated and the poverty is no less," said Artur Virgilio, mayor of Manaus. "Only the wealthy have so far benefited from the destruction."

Foreign groups have said they would pressure international financial institutions not to release new funding for Amazon-related projects. The World Bank, which has loaned Brazil \$15 billion since 1949 for energy-related and development projects, is a principal target.

For example, environmental groups have urged the World Bank to reject a \$500 million loan that would help Brazil refinance some debt from construction of dams and power plants. They say Brazil would use some of the money for new projects instead of for balancing payments on other loans.

But this month, Brazil and the World Bank announced a proposed \$1 billion loan for electric power development. Details of the proposed loan, to be spread out over 18 months, were not disclosed pending further negotiations.