

The nation's environmental agency found that the leading deforesters of the Amazon are the rich and powerful, but the government seems unwilling to do much of anything about it.

# While the Amazon burns, Brazil's government fiddles

By Laurie Coaring

TRIBUNE FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT

RIO DE JANEIRO—The destruction of Brazil's Amazon has a face, and it is Roberto da Costa's.

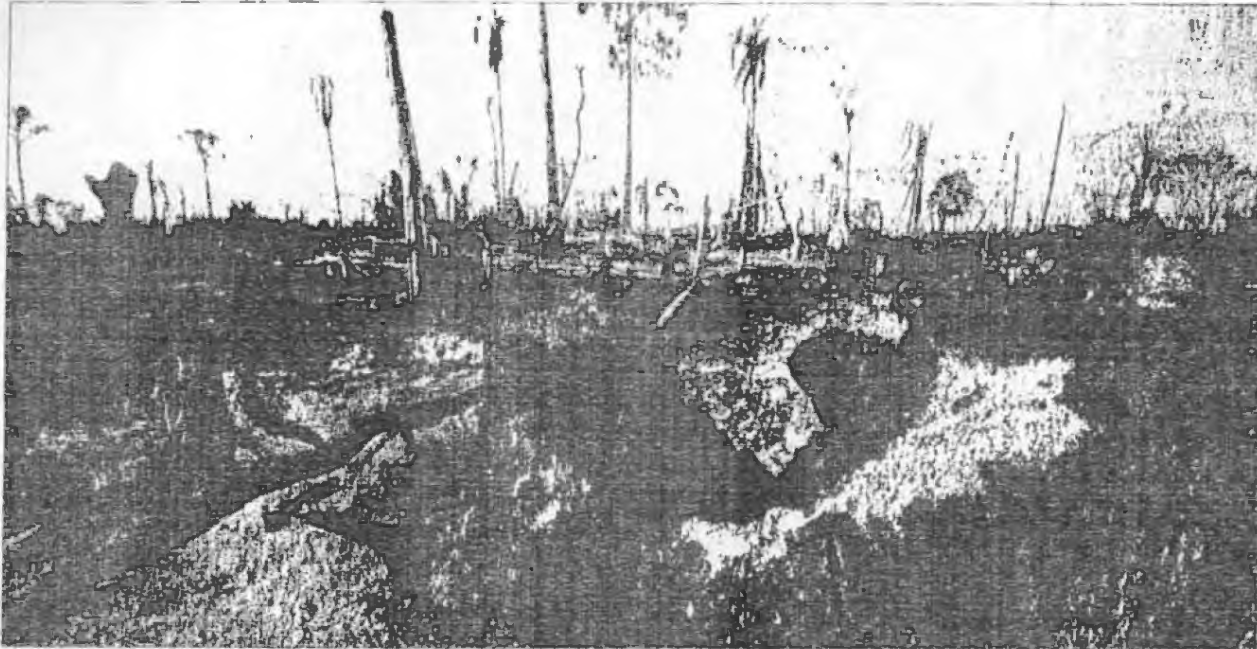
Last year the Brazilian eye surgeon, a wealthy clinic owner, illegally torched 6,841 acres of Amazon rain forest to create cattle pasture on his Para state ranch, My Dream Farm, according to the Brazilian environmental agency.

Costa, who lives and works two states away, sees nothing wrong with developing his not-so-little corner of the Amazon, now home to a herd of 4,000 white zebu cattle.

"The press usually makes us out as villains, but who are the ones generating jobs around here?" he recently told *Veja*, a Brazilian news magazine, after Brazil's environmental agency named him one of the country's top 10 deforesters. "We are trying to improve the life of the local population."

While Amazonia needs jobs and its poor need a better life, it is mainly Brazil's rich who are growing fatter as the Amazon goes up in smoke, at a rate some researchers now say is at least twice that previously thought.

According to a new report by the World Bank, 75 percent of the burning on the most endangered edge of the Amazon is carried out



AP photo by Ernie Peters

A section of the Amazon rain forest lies in ashes. Great areas of the forest were lost to 1996 burn offs that went away

by ranchers such as Costa. Only 25 percent is linked to peasant farmers, who traditionally have drawn a larger share of blame for the fires.

That a few wealthy ranchers are

responsible for much of the illegal burning in the Amazon suggests that bringing the destruction under control should be easier than when the fires were looked at as a faceless uncontrollable

disaster.

"This is not something out of human control. The government can decide to make changes or not," said Phillip Fearnside, an ecologist with the National Insti-

tute of Amazon Research in Manaus. "It's much more feasible to control deforestation than it would be if it were small farmers doing the burning."

Last year, Brazil's Congress

took a step toward tougher regulation, passing the nation's first environmental crimes law. Under the law, the maximum penalty for environmental crimes, including illegal burning and logging in the Amazon, soared from \$3,000 to \$30 million, and flagrant violators could for the first time be jailed.

Defeated with protests from logging companies, ranchers and factory owners, however, the government quickly backed down. It first refused to issue implementation rules for the new law and then ruled that the law would not go into effect for six years, purportedly to give businesses time to adapt.

Scientists call the retreat a capitulation to Brazil's rich and powerful and a green light for continued destruction of the Amazon.

"The federal government may say it wants to protect the Amazon, but it's sending conflicting messages," said Paulo Barreto, a forest management researcher at IMAZON, the Belem-based Institute for Man and the Environment in Amazonia.

The essential problem, he said, is that "enforcement has a high political cost."

Agents for IBAMA, Brazil's version of the Environmental Protection Agency, have been shot at, threatened and thrown out of town while trying to investigate illegal logging in regions of the Amazon

The U.S. did the same thing via forests & ag soils - I guess we are all supposed to know better now!

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logging in regions of the Amazon that base most of their economy on such activity. Hotels and restaurants refuse them service.

Politicians and bureaucrats have run into similar pressure. In February, Brazil's environmental minister ordered a ban on new Amazon clearing permits after satellite photos showed that 6,500 square miles of the Amazon disappeared last year, due to fire and logging, a 27 percent jump from 1997.

Last month the ban was revoked, just as the Amazon cutting and burning season got under way. The government promised to speed the processing of burn permits and allow burning of areas of less than 7½ acres without a permit in exchange for a pledge by ranchers and loggers to be more careful.

The permits make little difference. Last year none of the top 10 burners of the Amazon—including Costa—had one. Fines for illegal burning are extremely low in comparison with the potential profits to be made on the cleared land, and only 20 percent of the fines issued in 1996-97 were ever collected, according to an IMAZON study.

"It's political pressure, obviously," said Thelma Krug, a spokeswoman at Brazil's National Institute for Space Research, which determines annual deforestation rates from satellite photos.

"It's much easier to punish someone who's illegally catching a turtle because he's hungry than to punish someone who is really committing a very dramatic environmental crime," she said.

In an April report in the journal *Nature*, researchers in Brazil and at the Woods Hole Research Center in Massachusetts suggest that Brazil has greatly underestimated the extent of fire and logging damage to the Amazon by relying solely on satellite photos.

Judging from interviews with wood mill operators and landowners like Costa, combined with small plane flyovers, researchers found that 17,000 square miles had been deforested last year, more than 2½ times the Brazilian estimate of 6,500 square miles.

That number was boosted largely because of runaway forest fires in 1998, but even in a normal year deforestation appears to be double that estimated by Brazil's government, scientists say.

Altogether, about 16 percent of the Amazon forest has disappeared, the scientists said, an area the size of Illinois, Michigan and Wisconsin combined.

A big contributor to the boost in deforestation, the report said, is selective logging, the process of extracting particularly valuable wood such as mahogany. Such cutting kills other trees in the process, leaving behind dead standing wood that makes the forest more vulnerable to fire.

Small undergrowth fires, which slowly crawl beneath the high rain forest canopy and are invisible to satellites, cause similar problems by killing thin-barked trees.

Brazil's recent currency devaluation, scientists say, has spurred new logging in the Amazon as the market for now-cheaper Brazilian timber grows. Budget cuts mandated by the International Monetary Fund also have slashed funds for forest protection, raising fears of a record season of destruction in the Amazon this year.

"I think public pressure for conservation is increasing, but parts of government are still committed to the old idea of developing the Amazon," said Barreto, the forest management researcher. "The next 10 years will tell us which side wins."