

Development Crucial To Saving The Brazilian Amazon

SAO PAULO - The best way to preserve the Amazon rain forest is to develop the region and bring viable economic alternatives to the millions of people who live there, a Brazilian cabinet member said on Friday.

Roberto Mangabeira Unger, a former Harvard law professor picked by President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to coordinate an Amazon sustainable development plan, also said Brazil would not be lectured to by foreign countries about conservation.

"We are taken aback by those who scold us, who warn us, since we see countries around the world that are talking from a high chair after having devastated their own forests," Unger, minister for strategic affairs, said in an interview.

"The Amazon is not just a collection of trees. It is also, and above all, a group of people," he added, noting that the vast region is home to 27 million people out of Brazil's total population of 185 million.

"If these people lack economic opportunities, the practical result will be disorganized economic activity, and disorganized economic activity will lead relentlessly to deforestation. The only way to preserve the Amazon is to develop it."

Unger was thrown into an unwanted spotlight this week when Marina Silva, a former rubber tapper who was hailed globally as a champion of the green movement, resigned her post as environment minister after losing a slew of battles in her efforts to protect the Amazon.

According to aides, the last straw came last week when Lula overlooked Silva and instead chose Unger to oversee the implementation of a government initiative to develop the Amazon in a sustainable way.

CALLED LULA GOVERNMENT 'MOST CORRUPT'

Unger, who three years ago denounced the Lula administration as the "most corrupt in Brazil's history," defended the president's decision to put him in charge of the Amazon initiative.

"The people who think it's natural for development of the Amazon to be undertaken by an environment ministry just don't understand that the Amazon is more than a forest," he said.

"An environment ministry lacks the instruments to deal with all the many problems of transport, energy, education, and of industry that are required to formulate and to implement a comprehensive development program."

Unger, who was born in Brazil but has lived most of his life in the United States, has long been politically active in Latin America. He is best known for his efforts to push for an alternative to neoliberalism, the label often given to the view that free-market economics and development go hand-in-hand.

But he is a newcomer to the environmental debate in Brazil, raising doubts about whether he is the right person to oversee the Amazon plan.

Jorge Viana, a Lula ally and former governor of the Amazon state of Acre, said in a radio interview on Thursday: "I respect Professor Mangabeira Unger, he's a Harvard professor, the professor of the professors. But when it comes to the Amazon, I think he's a student."

Silva's successor in the Environment Ministry, Carlos Minc, has suggested that Viana might be better equipped for the job.

Unfazed, Unger is already moving forward with the plan and is about to embark on a tour of the Amazon to hammer out development strategies with state governors.

"The Amazon is the frontier, not just of geography but of the imagination. It is our great national laboratory," he said. "It is the space in which we can best rethink and reorganize the whole country, and define this new model of development."

(Editing by Mohammad Zargham)

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