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Paving of Brazilian jungle highway to spur massive Amazon development
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This AP story also appeared on the following websites:
ENN.com (Environmental News Network)

Burly truckers share thermoses of sweet coffee, cook rice and beans on camp stoves and lounge in the sweltering shade of broad-leafed palms as they wait for a front-end loader to tow their rigs through a half-mile stretch of waist-deep mud deep in the Amazon jungle near Tucurape, Brazil.

Help can take hours or even days to arrive on BR163, one of Brazil's worst national highways. But there's good money to be had hauling everything from exotic jungle hardwood to Coca-Cola in these parts, and there are rumblings that the highway is about to get a lot better.

One thing is on the lips of everyone from the truckers to the new settlers of roadside towns that appear on few maps: asphalt, and how it will soon bring growth and opportunity to a big swath of the world's largest wilderness. In a controversial plan, Brazil's government is preparing to let private companies embark on a \$417 million paving project to turn BR163 into a modern two-lane toll highway stretching 1,100 miles, nearly the distance between Philadelphia and Miami. That would link Brazil's most important soy-growing region with a deep-water Amazon River port.

Truck traffic will skyrocket as the country opens up a new export corridor for soybeans, Brazil's most important crop. Trips that now take weeks during the six-month rainy season will be cut to a matter of hours.

The pavement is bound to boost migration and is expected to lead to deforestation, prompting warnings from environmentalists of possible ecological disaster.

No longer will truckers have to snooze in hammocks beside dense forests of poisonous snakes and spiders, grunting monkeys and 140-pound rodents called capybaras that roam the road at night. Instead, they'll rest at the truck stops serving all-you-can-eat Brazilian barbecue that have already started to pop up in hamlets now separated by road sections impassable even for four-wheel-drive vehicles.

"I've been waiting for the pavement for 20 years," said trucker Honorato Gomes da Silva, waiting for a tow barefoot, his boots in his rig so they wouldn't get sucked into mud that acts like quicksand with any kind of shoes.

"We're used to sleeping in the forest, but that will be a thing of the past when the pavement comes," he said.

This jungle highway isn't the Trans-Amazon Highway, another mostly muddy road running east-west from the Atlantic Ocean to Colombia, which was scheduled to be completely paved decades ago.

The three-year paving project on the north-south BR163 could begin as early as this year. While asphalt has been laid down on 530 miles of BR163, the highway is useless for agribusiness until the private effort finishes the job.

Once the paving is completed, Brazil which has become an undisputed agricultural superpower over the last decade will be able to drastically reduce the price of sending its crops abroad.

"The Trans-Amazon is last-century stuff," said Riordan Roett, director of Western Hemisphere studies at Johns Hopkins University's school of international studies in Washington, D.C. "The north-south route is where you get the soybeans, and it is a logical route for inland migration as well," from Brazil's populous south to the relatively uninhabited Amazon.

Environmentalists and Indians warn the pavement will eliminate even more rain forest, and bring crime, drugs and prostitution to an area whose remoteness has largely protected it from such problems.

And unless the growth is controlled under strict federal oversight, they say, the road could also bring violent land conflicts. In Para, the Brazilian state where most of the paving will take place, those are often solved by gunslinging "pistoleiros."

Critics point to the February slaying of American nun Dorothy Stang, who spent 23 years protecting the rain forest and peasants. The killing was blamed on a rancher coveting land Stang was trying to protect. The government temporarily froze development in 32,000 square miles along BR163 in response, but environmentalists believe the ban will be lifted within a year.

"Economics are determining the fate of the Amazon," said Paulo Adario, who heads Greenpeace's Amazon project. "The paving is inevitable, and at the end of the day, the discussion is centering on what we are willing to lose."

That's a bet made by waves of ranchers, loggers, storekeepers and farmers who have washed into the land around the road, a region the size of France, Germany and Italy combined. Keen on exploiting natural resources that will be more accessible thanks to the paved road, many spent their life savings to resettle in towns that only recently got electricity and telephones.

In Novo Progresso ("New Progress" in Portuguese), the population has doubled to 40,000 in only five years. Merchants sell everything from chain saws to veterinary supplies in squat concrete buildings erected along BR163, whose dirt stretch also serves as the town's main street.

Many Novo Progresso merchants compare the paving project to the Transcontinental Railway, which opened up the midwestern and western United States to immigration and development in the 19th century.

Supporters say the highway will bring jobs to help ease grinding poverty throughout Brazil, where many of the 182 million citizens consider themselves lucky to make the minimum wage of \$125 a month.

"I'm not against preservation, but we have to find ways to solve Brazil's social problems. And the way to do this is through development, progress and jobs," said Mayor Tony Rodrigues, a newcomer who teamed up with Chinese partners to start one of the dozens of new sawmills in Novo Progresso.

No one is trying to stop the paving of BR163; road supporters and critics agree that the economic forces driving the project are unstoppable. After years of delay, Brazil's Congress opened the project to private funding with a new law in December.

Behind the momentum is Brazil's thriving agribusiness industry, which accounts for about 40 percent of the country's gross domestic product and provides tens of millions of jobs.

Soy is king, with Latin America's largest country second only to the United States in production. Brazil is desperate for a cheaper and faster route to export the commodity because of supply bottlenecks caused by crumbling highways that lead to overburdened ports on the Atlantic Ocean.

BR163 cuts 600 miles off the trip, providing a perfect link from Brazil's top soy-growing state of Mato Grosso to the Amazon River, where Cargill Inc. the Minneapolis-based agricultural giant and Brazil's largest soy exporter built a \$20 million port three years ago in the expectation that the road would eventually be paved.

Shipping a metric ton of soy from Mato Grosso to the Atlantic ports costs about \$82 during harvest time, but would cost only \$50 to \$60 a ton via BR163, said Seneri Paludo, a grains analyst at the AgRural consultancy in Cuiaba, the state capital of Mato Grosso.

Up to 10 million tons could eventually be shipped via the highway annually, translating into shipping savings of up to \$320 million a year that would be passed on to customers in Europe and China.

"BR163 needs to happen," Paludo said. "It would really improve our competitiveness with the North Americans, and has turned into a question of economic viability."

But Indians living near the road say loggers are already illegally cutting some of the trees they use to make their traditional canoes, and they worry that the road will bring farmers who will cut down more trees to make way for cattle, soy and other crops.

"The forest gives us our life," said Francinaldo Rocha, a leader of about 150 Munduruku Indians who eke out a living by fishing, hunting and growing manioc and corn along a tributary of the Amazon River. "The asphalt is really just for the rich."

The road also would benefit multinational companies like Honda Motor Co. and Royal Philips Electronics NV who set up shop decades ago in the remote free-trade-zone city of Manaus, upriver along the Amazon River from the Cargill terminal.

Instead of using boats to ship computers, cell phones and televisions all the way to southern Brazil, the companies could take advantage of BR163 and cut days and thousands of miles off the trip.

Honda, for example, sends 1 million motorcycles to southern Brazil every year, at a per-bike cost of \$42 that could be reduced to \$29 via BR163. That's a \$12.5 million savings, said Issao Mizoguchi, Honda's plant manager in Manaus.

In a bid to ensure orderly growth, Brazil's government is finalizing a sustainable development plan to control a land rush that could boost the area's population from nearly 2 million to as many as 3.5 million by 2020. The draft plan calls for increased federal presence to stem illegal logging and land seizures, and social programs to help poor families and prevent landowners from turning workers into debt slaves.

Critics warn that the government faces a possibly overwhelming task, and doesn't have the track record to prove it can handle the job. Brazil has some of the strictest environmental legislation in the world, but the laws are often poorly enforced.

"Is the government ready to put a soldier behind each tree?" Adario asked. "This is the question."

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