

Indians: Invasions of Amazon reserves continue

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BELEM, Brazil -- Amazon Indian reservations continue to be invaded by loggers, ranchers and farmers, despite a global financial crisis that has hurt the demand for their commodities, representatives from across the region said Friday.

Indians at the World Social Forum told The Associated Press that a lack of government support is undercutting the fight against illegal invasions by people seeking to clear the rain forest for profit.

"Our territory is supposedly protected, but the loggers are always coming in and taking our land," said 19-year-old Leve Srezasu, an Indian of the Guarani tribe in Brazil's Tocantins state, where there have often been violent clashes over land.

Environmentalists and the government blame most Amazon deforestation on illegal clearing for lumber, farming and grazing of livestock, much of it on ancestral lands that the Brazilian government in 1988 promised to return to its Indian tribes. While that process has yet to be completed, about 11 percent of Brazilian territory and nearly 22 percent of the Amazon is now in Indian hands.

In the last 20 years, Brazil's government has made big efforts to protect Indians and the Amazon, creating government agencies and watchdog groups to stop the damage to forests and those who live in them.

But critics say the government either lacks the money or political will to give the agencies the manpower, boats and helicopters needed to police the Amazon, a sparsely populated region the size of western Europe.

"The majority of senators are supported by big business," said indigenous rights leader Marcos Xukuru. "This has completely trapped the process of demarcating Indian reserves."

Brazil's national Indian bureau, known as Funai, did not immediately respond to requests for comment about the protection of Indian reserves and illegal logging on them.

Brazil's President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has often bristled at criticism _ especially coming from outside Brazil _ on his government's handling of the Amazon.

"There are many people making guesses about the Amazon without knowing that almost 25 million people live here who want to work, who want access to material goods and who don't want the Amazon to be a sanctuary for humanity," he told reporters in Belem.

More than 20 percent of the forest has been destroyed since scientists began tracking its destruction about two decades ago.

After declining for three years, deforestation spiked early last year as rising commodity prices drove farmers, ranchers and loggers to raze even more land.

Last week, however, the environmental group Imazon, which tracks deforestation, said the rate of destruction of the forest had dropped 82 percent from August through December, when compared to the same period in 2007.

Environment Minister Carlos Minc said in December that Brazil plans to boost spending and programs to significantly slow destruction of the Amazon by 2017, when they hope deforestation will annually be half of the 4,633 square miles (12,000 square kilometers) of jungle that were destroyed between August 2007 and July 2008.

But Indians said they are wary of government promises and hopes that the economic meltdown will slow deforestation.

"It hasn't stopped, regardless of this crisis," said Resivaldo Xipaia, a 33-year-old farmer from the Kupa reserve in Para state.

Associated Press writer Marco Sibaja in Brasilia, Brazil, contributed to this report