

'Stagnation' made Brazil's environment chief resign

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Marina Silva, the environmental minister who resigned this week, blamed "stagnation" in the government for her decision at a news conference on Thursday and acknowledged that governors in frontline Amazon states were pressing the president to rescind measures intended to check deforestation.

"There were questions from some governors about those measures, and they couldn't be relaxed," Silva said.

"It is crucial that we preserve the advances we have made, it is crucial that we don't take a step backwards," she said.

Her resignation on Tuesday shocked the international environmental community, which saw Silva, a former rubber tapper, as a bulwark against deforestation of the Amazon.

It also surprised the government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, who came into office in 2003 being hailed as his country's first "green" president.

Silva has said she will return to the Brazilian senate, a decision likely to complicate matters for Da Silva, who has struggled to react to the political fallout over a recent spike in Amazon deforestation, the first such increase in three years. In response, the government has restricted credit to those businesses involved in illegal deforestation and initiated a multiagency police operation to crack down on illegal logging.

Nongovernmental organizations were clearly alarmed over the resignation. Greenpeace Brazil called it a "disaster" that clearly demonstrated a "change of posture" in the government.

Despite the timing, Silva's departure was not entirely unexpected, however. She had become increasingly isolated in the administration and had lost several political battles to Da Silva. Most notably, she opposed approval of new hydroelectric dams in the Amazon and criticized the president's biofuels program. She also lost a fight against the planting of genetically modified crops.

In leaving, she underscored the tension between environmental concerns and the powerful agribusiness sector that has been a primary engine of growth in Brazil's commodity-led economy. On Thursday, Silva acknowledged to reporters that the governors of the states of Mato Grosso and Rondonia had resisted her agency's directions. The last straw for her might have come last week when Da Silva designated Roberto Mangabeira Unger, the minister for strategic affairs, to coordinate an Amazon sustainable development initiative instead of Silva, who had been reared in the tropical rainforest she sought to preserve. Silva said the president never consulted her about selecting Unger, a former Harvard law professor who first visited the Amazon last year on a "fact finding" mission.

Some environmentalists expressed concern that without Silva in the cabinet the Da Silva government would put the economy ahead of protecting the Amazon. "If Lula is buckling or considering buckling from pressure from agribusiness to back off of fighting deforestation it will have a high cost for Brazil's international reputation," said Stephan Schwartzman, co-director of the international program at Environmental Defense Fund in Washington.

The record Silva helped set for Brazil gave Brazil international credibility and allowed Da Silva to become a new player in global climate change talks. "All of the hard-nosed deforestation control initiatives have come out of the environment ministry and have prospered under her leadership," Schwartzman said.

They included designating more than 49 million acres of Amazon land for environmental protection over the past five years. And partly through a moratorium on soybean plantings in

the Amazon, deforestation levels dropped for two straight years, only to spike late last year after global prices for grains also shot up.

The advances and advocate strategies gave Brazil the credibility to propose that other countries and businesses donate money for deforestation. Norway said it would donate close to \$2.8 billion over five years as payment to developing countries that preserve their forests.

While Da Silva publicly supported Silva's efforts, she had become a thorn in his side. He grew frustrated with Ibama, the federal environmental protection agency Silva led, because its technicians refused to issue environmental licenses for large development projects, including badly needed hydroelectric projects, said David Fleischer, a political analyst in Brasilia.

In the middle of last year Da Silva split Ibama into two agencies, separating the environmental protection functions from the issuance of such licenses. Ibama workers went on strike, forcing him to call in specialists from the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank to further study the projects on the Madeira River in Rondonia State, Fleischer said.

At that point many analysts said Silva should resign, but she stayed. She said Thursday that the president never was prepared "to give the license, to change the law."

Now the delicate task of charting the Amazon's future will fall to her successor Carlos Minc, the state secretary for the environment in Rio de Janeiro. Minc, 57, is an economist and geography professor who was a founder of Brazil's Green Party and received a United Nations Global 500 Roll of Honor award in 1990 for being a standout defender of the environment. Unger, who will also play a role, in an interview vowed to stay away from "extremist" positions. "An environmental policy bereft of an economic strategy is self-defeating," he said. "We need to establish an intimate link between preservation and growth."

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