

World News Bits

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WORLD NEWS BITS

By Roger Phillips

Americas

Amazon Deforestation Rate Jumps 40%

A group of environmental experts warned that four infrastructure projects in the Amazon have caused a rush of deforestation even before building has begun. The report on the world's largest tropical forest, by international environmental experts charged with advising Brazil and rich countries donating to a program which has channeled \$350 million to conserving the Amazon, came after data in June showed the Amazon deforestation rate jumped 40 percent last year. Profitable soy farming is seen as a special threat. Roughly 15 percent of the Amazon - an area larger than western Europe of continuous tropical forest that is home to up to 30 percent of the world's animal and plant species - has so far been cut down. Annual Amazon deforestation rose to 9,840 square miles last year, an area slightly smaller than Haiti, from 7,010 square miles in 2001. The report recommended that the projects be reconsidered to take into account long-term environmental impacts and urged that the wide-scale problem of illegal land deeds in the Amazon be formalized, which could make monitoring considerably easier for the government.¹

Ecuadorian Indians Sue Chevron Texaco

Ecuadorian Indians filed a billion dollar lawsuit demanding that ChevronTexaco clean-up Amazon jungle after allegedly dumping toxins that destroyed rivers and made people sick. Lawyers for the Indians filed the suit at the Superior Court in Lago Agrio, marking the first time the decade-old case will be heard in Ecuador after years of U.S. court battles over jurisdiction. Plaintiffs accuse subsidiary Texaco Petroleum Co. of dumping water laden with oil and metal salts like mercury and cadmium into Amazon rivers from 1972 to 1992 instead of reinjecting these waters into the ground. Indians also say Texaco dumped this oily wastewater into pits that seeped toxins into the soil, damaging crops, killing farm animals and causing cancer in local communities, according to a copy of the lawsuit provided by the plaintiffs. The case was first filed in the United States in 1993. But the U.S. Second Circuit Court of Appeals last year affirmed a ruling that Ecuador was a more appropriate venue. Lawyers, who say they represent 30,000 people, allege Texaco dumped roughly 18.5 billion gallons of oil-laden water during operations and demand that the company pay for a clean-up estimated \$1 billion.²

Africa

Beetles Save Money For Benin

Two species of beetle are credited with saving the economy of Benin in West Africa \$260 million over 20 years. Between them, they have overpowered an aquatic super-weed that kills fish, interferes with boats and changes the ecology of lakes. Floating mats of the water hyacinth can double in size in less than two weeks, with the sheer density of its foliage making fishing and boating all but impossible. In addition, it gives cover to crocodiles, making it hazardous for local people to collect water.

Harvesting of the weed has proved futile because it grows so fast. In the late 1980s, Nigeria spent \$1.75 million on machinery to chew up the plants, without making any impact. Pesticides are another option, but they pollute the water and kill other plants. The most effective weapons, though, have been the weevils *Neochetina eichhorniae* and *N. bruchi*, which eat water hyacinth and nothing else. Setting them onto the weed can cut coverage by up to 90 per cent. The beasts were first introduced to Sudan, but have now been deployed across Africa.³

Corporate Misfeasance Blamed For Starvation in Lesotho

As two million people in Lesotho are in need of international food aid to avoid starvation, a criminal conviction suggests that irresponsible corporate conduct may contribute to such development problems. Last May, a Maseru court sentenced the former head of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project, Mauspha Sole, to 18 years in prison for bribery. The court found Sole accepted \$3 million from Western companies in exchange for lucrative contracts on the massive dam scheme which was meant to provide electricity and water to South Africa downstream. Lesotho's hope is that by prosecuting the multinational construction and engineering conglomerates who paid the kickbacks will serve as a cautionary tale to Western contractors.⁴

Zambia Adopts Biosafety Measures

Seven months after Zambia rejected genetically modified foods and banned American transgenic food donations from entering its territory, the Zambian government has developed a National Biosafety and Biotechnology Strategy Plan. The five year plan, from 2003 to 2007, addresses the proliferation of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) in the country. It also sets the pace for Zambia to develop biosafety

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regulations to protect the country's unique biodiversity. The new biosafety and biotechnology framework identifies seven core program areas. These include environment and biodiversity, which aims at conserving the genetic diversity of Zambia's crops. Other program areas are livestock, fish, and the control of environmental pollution. The plan also aims at enacting legislation that will govern the research, development, and utilization of genetically modified organisms.⁵

Middle East

Bush Provides Immunity to Oil Industry Work in Iraq

A executive order signed by President Bush more than two months ago is raising concerns that U.S. oil companies may have been handed blanket immunity from lawsuits and criminal prosecution in connection with the sale of Iraqi oil. In countries such as Nigeria, law suits have been used to prevent oil companies from destroying the environment and using militias to quell local protest of corporate practice. However, if the language of the new executive order is given its plain meaning, it could completely shield oil companies from liability – even if it could be proved that they had committed human rights violations, bribed officials or caused great environmental damage in the course of their Iraqi-related business.⁶

Asia

Three Gorges Dam Resettles 1.3 Million

The 1.4 mile wide Three Gorges dam closed its gates in an effort to provide electricity and flood control for communities downstream. The Chinese government will resettle 1.3 million Chinese to make room for the expected 600 foot deep, 365 mile long lake. However, there remain significant criticisms of the project's ability to fulfill its purpose. Some criticize that it will become a slow-moving cesspool choked with sediment and toxic pollutants and that the rapid accumulation of silt will limit power production and flood control and reduce the dam's lifespan to just 50 years.⁷

Tokyo Warned of Power Shortage Without Nukes

Japan's trade and industry minister warned that the Tokyo area could suffer power shortages if Tokyo Electric Power Co Inc is unable to restart more nuclear reactors. TEPCO, the world's largest stock exchange-listed power utility, has been forced to successively close down its reactors for safety checks since last September after it acknowledged falsifying some data on past inspections. A large obstacle to TEPCO restarting its reactors is the Japanese public's concerns

about safety, which have been stoked by a series of accidents at nuclear plants. TEPCO has turned to thermal power plants to cover the void left by the loss of nuclear power, which typically accounts for a little over 40 percent of its power supply. TEPCO's reliance on thermal power has also forced a huge rise in the company's consumption of fossil fuels.⁸

(Endnotes)

¹ Axel Bugge, *Environmentalists Warn of Roads, Dams in Amazon*, REUTERS NEWS SERVICE available at <http://www.planetark.org/dailynewsstory.cfm/newsid/20708/story.htm>

² Amy Taxin, *Ecuador Indians Sue Texaco Over Polluted Water*, REUTERS NEWS SERVICE available at <http://www.planetark.org/dailynewsstory.cfm/newsid/20745/story.htm>.

³ James Randerson, *Weevils Save Lakes From Water Hyacinth*, NEW SCIENTIST, May 10, 2003, at 10.

⁴ Jason Beaubien, *Bribery Scandal in Lesotho*, MORNING EDITION NPR, May 19, 2003 available at 2003 WL 4857618.

⁵ Singy Hanyona, *Zambia Develops Biotechnology Strategy*, ENS NEWS SERVICE, April 29, 2003 available at <http://ens-news.com/ens/apr2003/2003-04-29-01.asp>.

⁶ Lisa Girion, *Immunity For Iraqi Oil Dealings Raises Alarm; Some Contend Bush's Order Grants U.S. Firms a Broad Exemption, A View The Government Rejects*, L.A. TIMES, August 7, 2003 available at WL 2425952.

⁷ Editorial, *Determined Disaster*, THE BALTIMORE SUN, June 4, 2003 available at 2003 WL 57161345.

⁸ Taiga Uranaka, *Rising Fuel Costs Bludgeon Tepco Profits*, THE JAPAN TIMES, May 21, 2003.