

Brazilian bishop pleads for help to stop rain forest's destruction

APARECIDA, Brazil – Saying “it’s five minutes to midnight” for the Amazon, a bishop from Brazil made an impassioned plea for all the countries of the world to join forces to stop the destruction of the rain forest.

German-born Bishop Erwin Krautler of Xingu, in northern Para state, said during a press conference May 19 that when he arrived in the area 42 years ago, “the Amazon was more or less intact and now it is threatened with destruction.”

Clearing and burning the rain forest to plant soy and sugar cane “will be a fatal blow for the Amazon,” he said. “If things continue as they are, in another 30 years the Amazon will not exist anymore.”

Destruction of the rain forest has accelerated since the 1970s with the construction of highways that have given ranchers, loggers and miners access to untouched land.

Environmental issues have been high on the Brazilian Catholic Church’s agenda in recent years, and many pastoral workers, including Bishop Krautler, have received death threats for their advocacy.

Several, like U.S. Sister Dorothy Stang, a member of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, have been killed. Bishop Krautler’s plea to save the rain forest came less than a week after a rancher was sentenced to 30 years in prison for hiring gunmen to kill Sister Dorothy in 2005.

The rain forest is home to indigenous peoples, rubber tappers and settlers who moved there in the 1970s “in search of a place where they could plant and harvest and make a living with their families,” Bishop Krautler said.

Defense of the Amazon “is not only defense of the flora and fauna,” he said. “From the standpoint of creation theology, when we defend the Amazon, we are defending the home of future generations. We are defending creation as a whole.”

Observers have said that the newest threat to the region is the widespread planting

of sugar cane to produce ethanol. Brazil is already a leading producer of ethanol, and President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva has said he wants to increase production and help African countries follow Brazil's example. U.S. President George W. Bush and da Silva signed an agreement to promote ethanol production in March.

The Brazilian bishops expressed concern about the plan in a May 9 statement.

Noting that in today's world "business takes precedence, without concern for its social and ecological costs," the bishops warned that this push "cannot be done to the detriment of the ecological balance, agrarian reform and food security," or in violation of human rights.

Bishop Krautler said, "We may as well chant a requiem for the Amazon if we don't take a stand against this threat."

He warned that Brazil runs the risk of "becoming a huge sugar cane field because of ethanol."

Because rain forest soil is poor in nutrients, when the trees are cleared and the ecological balance is destroyed, it turns into a vast, relatively infertile plain, Bishop Krautler said.

This has already happened because of the clearing of forest for ranching and soy farming, he said.

"If we rob and burn the Amazon to plant sugar cane, nothing will be left afterward because the soil will be deteriorated," he said. "We can have ethanol, we can have a new focus on sugar cane, and the people will die."

Noting that both soy and ethanol are export products, Bishop Krautler said, "We have to rethink the concept of development" with models that are sustainable and not focused only on economic gain.

"Development will only be possible if it respects the environment and the land where (Amazonian) peoples are living," he said.