



Enforcer. Carlos Minc at a government raid in June near Santarém, Brazil, with illegal timber.

NEWSMAKER INTERVIEW

Carlos Minc Pushes a Bold Agenda As Brazil's Environment Chief

BRASÍLIA—Carlos Minc has a reputation for bold strokes. During Brazil's military dictatorship, he was accused of helping an armed leftist group make off with a 350-kg safe belonging to a corrupt politician. The reputed haul: \$2.5 million. Minc was tortured and jailed and spent years in exile. Now Minc, who became environment minister in 2008, is again in the spotlight, this time for his role in engineering Brazil's announcement on 13 November that it would voluntarily make deep cuts in its greenhouse-gas emissions.

As the first major emerging economy to promise cuts, Brazil could seed a diplomatic initiative at December's United Nations summit on climate change in Copenhagen, where countries are attempting to forge a replacement for the expiring Kyoto Protocol. So far, China and the United States, the world's largest emitters, have refused to endorse specific targets. But other countries—including South Korea, which announced a plan for 30% cuts by 2020—have joined Brazil in calling for action.

A 58-year-old geographer rarely seen without his trademark embroidered vest, Minc has a reputation as a media-savvy green leader with pragmatic instincts. He won industry applause when he quickly approved a huge petrochemical plant. But he's successfully pressed for tougher action against deforestation, posing with seized timber or jumping on a tractor to knock down illegal charcoal furnaces. *Science* caught up with Minc in Brasília to ask him how he persuaded Brazil's

president, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, to adopt voluntary emissions cuts. His answers have been edited for brevity. —ANTONIO REGALADO

Antonio Regalado is a writer in São Paulo, Brazil.

Q: Whom do you consider the most influential environmentalist in the world today?

C.M.: I think it's the scientists of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. The positions that the IPCC took showed people for the first time that global warming is not a fiction and created a global clamor around the biggest planetary crisis civilization has faced.

Q: What is Brazil's mitigation plan?

C.M.: We want to reduce greenhouse emissions by 36 to 39% by 2020, which will actually take us back to where we were in 2003. ... A year ago, we didn't have a climate plan or emissions goals, even though Brazil is the fifth or sixth largest emitter.

Q: How did you persuade Brazil's president to agree to the plan?

C.M.: We worked with the scientific community and showed that our mitigation steps, like expanding no-till farming and recuperating degraded land, wouldn't freeze our economy and that they didn't interfere with the creation of jobs or the reduction of hunger and inequality.

Our diplomats worried that if we adopted aggressive limits, we would embarrass our allies, who aren't reducing emissions. India,

for instance, is going to double them. But after a lot of discussion with the environment ministers of China, India, and South Africa, they told me they wouldn't be offended if Brazil went ahead, so long as it was clear we were not demanding that they do the same thing. They wanted to make sure our criticisms would be directed more at countries like the U.S., which are major emitters and not doing their homework. So I explained that to the president.

Q: How long did it take to convince the president?

C.M.: Two months. I explained to him that Brazilian society, even the industrial sector, was asking for this, and if we didn't act, it could lead to frustration domestically. Secondly, there was a chance that Copenhagen would be a failure. And Brazil, under no conditions, could associate itself with failure. We had to be a breath of oxygen, of renewable energy, for Copenhagen. So then President da Silva, who is not a scientist but is a great statesman and highly intuitive, sniffed out the best path: that what is good for ecology is also good for him politically, as much internationally as domestically.

Q: How do we know Brazil's mitigation plan is real and not mere talk?

C.M.: Half of our 39% emissions cut will come from the Amazon—reducing deforestation by 80%. We're starting with a baseline of 19,500 square kilometers [of forest lost annually] between 1996 and 2005. This year, we already got to 7500 square kilometers, the lowest level of deforestation in 21 years.

Q: How are you reducing deforestation?

C.M.: I've participated in 28 raids in the Amazon during the last 17 months. When we discovered cattle in environmental reserves, we auctioned them off for the government's antihunger program. I said illegal cattle will turn into barbecue for the poor. People thought I was kidding. We've already donated 20,000 head of cattle to prevent environmental criminals from enriching themselves. The other side is, you need to provide alternatives for sustainable forest management. We established minimum prices for 10 forest products. Just punishing people doesn't work.

Q: Two days after Brazil's announcement, the U.S. and China said no climate treaty was possible at Copenhagen. Your reaction?

C.M.: It was frustrating. I think the citizens of those countries need to speak out forcefully and not accept those positions as inevitable.