

Amazon tribes to get free internet



Broadband is coming ... members of Brazil's Assurini do Tocantins tribe, wearing their traditional "Cokar" headgear.

Photo: Reuters

March 30, 2007 - 12:02PM

Brazil will offer free satellite internet connections to indigenous tribes in the Amazon as part of its latest effort to crack down on illegal logging in the world's largest tropical rain forest.

"It's a way to open communications between indigenous communities, former slave villages, coconut crackers, river fishermen and the rest of society," said Environment Minister Marina Silva on Thursday after signing an accord putting the internet plan in place.

"These communities are the true protectors of their areas," she said.

Brazil, a relatively poor country that is the size of the continental United States, has struggled to protect its vast Amazon rain forest from illegal miners, loggers and ranchers.

Deforestation peaked in 2004 as global demand soared for products like beef, chicken and soy. Brazil is an agriculture powerhouse that depends heavily on such exports.

Silva, who was raised by Amazon rubber-tappers and fought alongside land-rights activist Chico Mendes in the 1980s, has been a vocal defender of the rain forest and the roughly 20 million people who live there.

Land clearing peaked when she first came to office, but she has since presided over numerous busts of illegal logging rings, often involving local officials.

Land protection is a key aim of the wireless internet plan, she said on Thursday.

The plan will bring internet to 150 small communities in the Amazon and other remote areas including Brazil's Pantanal wetlands and its arid Northeast. Many villages in such areas are cut off from outsiders because they lack basic infrastructure like roads.

"Internet helped us bring in the police (when we had illegal logging in our area)," said Benhi Piyanko, a member of an Ashaninka indigenous village of some 500 people in the Amazon state of Acre. "We managed to spread the message widely. We even reached the president."

While the Brazilian government will provide the internet access, state and local governments will

have to come up with a way to provide computers so the internet can be used.

Indigenous leaders support the program but worry that computers might erode native cultures in a country that has well over 200 tribes, said Ailton Krenak, a member of the Krenak people and also of Brazil's national Forest People's Network.

"I don't like computers but I don't like planes either," he said. "What can you do?"

Reuters

[Subscribe to The Age and WIN an African adventure with Peregrine, valued at \\$15,000](#)

More Technology

Copyright © 2007. The Age Company Ltd