



BRAZIL'S BURNING SEASON: THE FACTS ABOUT AMAZON FIRES

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BACKGROUND

In August of 2019, images of the Amazon rainforest on fire shocked the global consciousness. The annual "burning season"—the period when recently deforested areas are burned to clear the area for agribusiness—was not new. However, the growing global understanding of the role of the rainforest in combating climate change collided with the Bolsonaro regime's assault on the Amazon and dramatic images circulating on social media. Brazilian cities were darkened by thick clouds of smoke from the fires, catalyzing Brazilian and international outrage.

The situation highlighted the threats faced by Indigenous, Quilombola (descendants of Afro-Brazilian slaves who escaped slavery before its abolition in Brazil,) and rural communities across the vast Brazilian Amazon. Their territories are under growing pressure from an extractive economy that prioritizes profits over people. The destructive industries are both illicit (illegal logging, mining, and drug cultivation) and government (agribusiness, mining projects like Belo Sun, and other infrastructure like dams, roads, and railways). Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro has made clear his disdain for the legal recognition of Indigenous territories and worked to legalize previously illegal activities in them.

Standing up to these powerful political and economic actors is often deadly. According to [Global Witness](#), Brazil saw 24 land and environmental defenders assassinated in 2019, and 90 percent of those murders were in the Amazon. Amazon Watch joined the world in denouncing the killing of Forest Guardian Paulo Paulino Guajajara and supported Alessandra Munduruku after her apartment was broken into in an attempt to intimidate her in late 2019.

The COVID-19 pandemic is the latest threat, reminiscent of previous sicknesses that wiped out entire Indigenous peoples. Numerous Indigenous leaders have perished in recent weeks from the novel coronavirus. According to the Association of Brazil's Indigenous Peoples (APIB), as of September 13 there are 31,469 confirmed infections among Indigenous peoples and 798 fatalities. This context is exacerbating the "burning season," as it is an excuse for government inaction and has weakened Forest Guardians' ability to defend their territories. In August, 60+ non-governmental groups coordinated with APIB to publish a list of ["Five Emergency Measures to Fight the Deforestation Crisis in the Amazon."](#)



Meanwhile, the evident destruction of the Amazon is putting international investment in Brazil and the advancement of free trade agreements at risk. To combat this scenario, the Bolsonaro regime has launched a public relations offensive, attempting to assuage international criticisms. They are propagating a series of lies, which require the following fact-checking.

FACT-CHECK #1

"THE AMAZON IS NOT BURNING"

According to [Reuters](#), on Tuesday, August 11 Bolsonaro said, "This story that the Amazon is going up in flames is a lie and we must combat it with true numbers." On September 9th, Vice President Hamilton Mourão, coordinator of the government's National Council for the Amazon, [stated that](#), "Brazil is the country that most preserves its native forests in the world. That's the truth. We take care!"

THE FACTS:

THE AMAZON IS, UNFORTUNATELY, ON FIRE AGAIN

- 1 On August 19, CNN rebutted Bolsonaro directly in its article, "[Bolsonaro says reports of Amazon fires are a 'lie.'](#)" yet evidence says otherwise." Responding to his assertion that "we must combat it with true numbers," CNN notes, "but the real numbers reported by Brazil's National Institute for Space Research (INPE) are damning: Since Bolsonaro took office in January 2019, deforestation has surged nearly 30%, which is mostly caused by illegal logging and fires set by loggers and developers. In July alone, INPE documented 6,803 fires in the Amazon, up from 5,318 a year ago. And in the first two weeks of August – the peak time for fires – the agency reported more than 15,000 fire spots in the Amazon."
- 2 The [Monitoring of the Andean Amazon Project \(MAAP\)](#) has "detected 646 major fires in the Brazilian Amazon thus far in 2020. Of these, 88% (569 major fires) occurred in August, and all were illegal, occurring after the burning moratoriums established in July. Also in August, we saw the sudden appearance of Forest Fires, defined here as human-caused fires in standing forest. We detected 82 forest fires in August, which now account for 13% of all the major fires. The vast majority of the major fires (79%) continue to burn recently deforested areas, defined here as areas where the forest was previously and recently cleared (between 2018-20) prior to burning. In fact, over 1.1 million acres (453,000 hectares) of recently deforested areas have burned in 2020. Thus, the fires are actually a smoking indicator of the current rampant deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon."
- 3 According to the September 9 Reuters article, "[Amazon fires worsen in September, and threaten virgin forests,](#)" fires in Brazil's Amazon rainforest worsened in the first week of September and are increasingly spreading into areas of untouched forest, satellite data showed as of Wednesday, after the number of fires likely reached a 10-year high in August."



FACT-CHECK #2

“BRAZIL’S MILITARY IS PROTECTING THE AMAZON”

In his June 8 letter to the U.S. House of Representatives Ways and Means Committee, Nestor Forster Jr. Chargé d'Affaires of the Brazilian Embassy to the United States stated, “The commitment of President Bolsonaro to the protection and sustainable development of the Amazon has been unwavering, as shown during Operations Green Brazil I and II which, since August 2019, have mobilized thousands of troops to combat fires and curb illegal deforestation.”

THE FACTS:

BRAZIL'S MILITARY IS NOT PROTECTING THE AMAZON

1 In a damning August 28 article, "AP finds Brazil's plan to protect Amazon has opposite effect," details how “under military command, Brazil’s once-effective but recently declining investigation and prosecution of rainforest destruction by ranchers, farmers and miners has come to a virtual halt, even as this year’s burning season picks up.”

2 As quoted in the August 7 CNN article, "Fires are raging in the Amazon, despite a Brazil government ban. The destruction could be worse than last summer." Paulo Barreto, senior researcher at the respected research institute Imazon, believes that sending the Army to curb deforestation is insufficient at this point. "It isn't enough just to inspect. To be effective, it is necessary to inspect, to judge, and to apply the penalty, and these two final parts of the process have been weak."



3 In his June 24 article "Bolsonaro sends army to the Amazon and undermines environmental regulators," journalist Sam Cowie notes that “Ibama agents say that burning apparatus and vehicles used by miners and loggers is one of the most effective tools at their disposal, representing a genuine financial and operational blow to criminals. But Bolsonaro has repeatedly voiced his opposition to environmental agencies burning mining machinery, and ministers of his government have met with representatives of the artisanal mining sector. 'The army is not approving destruction with the use of fire, which is what really makes the use of machinery unfeasible and guarantees the criminal’s financial loss,' said one source, who wished to remain anonymous.”

FACT-CHECK #3

“THE SOLUTION TO AMAZON FIRES IS 'ADOPT A PARK' AND 'SUSTAINABLE' INVESTMENTS”

As reported on August 17 by [Bloomberg](#), Brazilian Minister of the Environment Ricardo Salles claims that a new “Adopt a Park” program will “give major investment funds a way to channel criticism of Brazil into concrete action.”

THE FACTS:

ONE SOLUTION IS INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE TO PROTECT THE AMAZON AND INDIGENOUS LAND RIGHTS

- 1 According to the [above-referenced article](#), “Brazil’s change in tone may also reflect economic interests rather than political positions,” said Isabela Kalil, a professor researching Bolsonaro’s politics at the School of Sociology and Politics of Sao Paulo. ‘I think this change is more about appearance than a change in the politics of the state or that Bolsonaro has effectively, for some reason, changed his position,’ she said.”
- 2 International pressure can work as argued in the September 14 Financial Times article titled, "[International pressure can save the Amazon from Bolsonaro.](#)" The article recommends, "it should increase. Ratification of the EU-Mercosur trade deal, should be made conditional on Brasília restoring environmental regulations and Ibama’s fining capacity. This pressure should be applied via the economically liberal wing of the government, headed by finance minister Paulo Guedes, and major Brazilian companies. Business elites may have lost some of their early influence in Brasília. Yet even Mr Bolsonaro understands the value of foreign investment and the worth of a trade deal estimated to add \$90bn over the next 15 years to Brazil’s sagging economy.”
- 3 Beyond national parks, protection of Indigenous territories is crucial to the defense of the Amazon. A September 8 PRI article, "[How Indigenous land rights could help save the Brazilian Amazon from deforestation,](#)" outlined that, “a recent study lends support to what many Indigenous people have often said: Lands held by Indigenous people are better protected from environmental destruction than other areas of the forest.... [The] study, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, found that deforestation was two-thirds lower within Indigenous territories compared to outside areas. 'Collective rights are very effective, but only when they are fully granted,' said Baragwanath [the study’s co-author], who added that property rights in Brazil are often only ensured with a lengthy legal process. While they promote 'Adopt a Park,' the Bolsonaro regime is actively working to undermine those same territorial rights for Indigenous peoples.”

FACT-CHECK #4

“DEFORESTATION IS DRIVEN BY POOR PEOPLE TRYING TO FEED THEMSELVES AND THEIR FAMILIES”

Early in 2020, [Folha de S. Paulo](#) reported Brazilian Minister of Economy Paulo Guedes' claim that "Nature's worst enemy is poverty. People destroy the environment because they need to eat."

THE FACTS:

DEFORESTATION IS DRIVEN BY LAND SPECULATION NETWORKS

- 1 Al Gore responded to Guedes' comments, as reported in [Folha de S. Paulo](#), by stating that, “‘Today, it is widely understood that the soil in the Amazon is poor. To tell people in Brazil that they are going to get to the Amazon, cut everything and start planting, and that they will have crops for many years, that is to give them false hope,’ he said. ‘Yes, there are answers for the Amazon, but this is not the case.’”
- 2 According to this investigation published on [Globo.com](#), a family farming operation would only be able to deforest 2-3 hectares a year (it is very labor intensive), while the scale of deforestation and fires indicates well-funded criminal operations to buy machinery like tractors and trucks.
- 3 The Brazilian website [Fakebook.eco](#), dedicated to debunking environmental and climate myths propagated by the Brazilian government, [states that](#), “Half of deforestation is linked to land speculation and crimes like land grabbing, done by well-financed gangs.”



RECOMMENDATIONS

Whereas the Bolsonaro regime is saying one thing but doing another, the question arises: what would it look like for the Brazilian authorities to actually exercise the political will to take effective steps to protect the Amazon?

THE FIRST STEPS FOR EFFECTIVE ACTION AGAINST AMAZON DEFORESTATION AND FIRES

In August, 60+ non-governmental groups coordinated with the Association of Brazil's Indigenous Peoples (APIB) to publish a list of "Five Emergency Measures to Fight the Deforestation Crisis in the Amazon." Those measures, in summary, include:

1. Moratorium on deforestation in the Amazon for at least five years.
2. Increased penalties for environmental crimes and deforestation.
3. Immediate resumption Action Plan for Prevention and Control of Deforestation in the Legal Amazon (PPCDAm.)
4. Demarcation of Indigenous and quilombola lands and creation, regularization, and protection of Conservation Units.
5. Restoring the institutional powers and authority of Ibama, ICMBio, and Funai.

An aerial photograph showing a deforested area. In the center, there is a settlement with several buildings and a large pile of logs. To the left, there are several large, dome-shaped structures, possibly for drying or storage. The surrounding area is mostly cleared land with some remaining trees and a dirt road.

Responding to the 2020 burning season, Amazon Watch has launched the Amazon Ceasefire Campaign. For the latest updates and actions you can take, please visit: amazonwatch.org/amazonceasefire