

Bolsonaro-Biden deal to protect the Amazon stalls amid pressure

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Indigenous people from the Mura tribe show a deforested area in the Amazon rainforest near Humaita, Amazonas State, Brazil in August 2019 [File: Ueslei Marcelino/Reuters]

Sao Paulo, April 18 (RHC)-- Brazil's government wants billions of dollars upfront from the United States and other wealthy nations to protect its Amazon rainforest, a crucial natural bulwark in the fight against climate change.

But Indigenous leaders, climate activists and a group of U.S. Democratic senators have warned U.S. President Joe Biden not to hand over any cash to the government of Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil's far-right populist president, under whom deforestation has soared.

"The current Brazilian government is simply not to be trusted," Sonia Guajajara, coordinator of Brazil's Articulation of Indigenous Peoples (APIB), an Indigenous advocacy collective, told Al Jazeera. Both administrations had hoped to carve out a deal to be announced when the White House hosts the Leaders Summit on Climate on April 22 and 23, people close to the talks said. But this week, hopes of a deal appeared to stall.

Bolsonaro's Environment Minister Ricardo Salles told the Reuters news agency on Friday night that he did not expect a deal to be announced at next week's summit, but that talks with the US would continue.

"President Jair Bolsonaro's recommitment to eliminating illegal deforestation is important. We look forward to immediate actions and engagement with indigenous populations and civil society so this announcement can deliver tangible results," special climate envoy John Kerry tweeted on Friday.

Meanwhile, Raoni Metuktire, one of Brazil's most iconic Indigenous leaders, released a video urging Biden to ignore Bolsonaro's promise to reduce illegal deforestation to zero by 2030 if his government received funding from the US.

Environmentalists noted that the 2030 target had already been promised by Brazil when it signed the Paris Agreement in 2015 under then-Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff. But since then deforestation has continued to climb year on year.

Fifteen U.S. senators, including Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren, also sent a letter to Biden on Friday warning that any aid given to Brazil must be conditioned on deforestation reduction results.

The senators referenced a 2019 Human Rights Watch report, Rainforest Mafias, to note how "deforestation was driven largely by powerful criminal networks that use intimidation and violence – with near total impunity – against those who seek to defend the rainforest."

"President Bolsonaro's rhetoric and policies have effectively given a green light to the dangerous criminals operating in the Amazon, allowing them to dramatically expand their activities," they said.

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