

Germany pledges millions to help Brazil protect Amazon rainforest

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Brasilia, January 31 (RHC)-- Germany has pledged tens of millions of dollars to help Brazil defend the Amazon rainforest, a critical global ecosystem that experienced years of devastation under former far-right Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro.

During a news conference in Brasilia on Monday, German Development Minister Svenja Schulze announced that Berlin would make \$38 million available for the Amazon Fund, an international mechanism largely funded by Norway that aims to prevent deforestation.

In 2019, Bolsonaro -- who promoted greater economic development in the Amazon and loosened environmental safeguards -- dissolved the steering committee that selects sustainable projects to finance, prompting Germany and Norway to freeze their donations.

“With the new government and the team of [Brazil’s] President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva and [environment] Minister Marina Silva, we have a great chance to protect the forest and to offer a new perspective to the people who live there,” said Schulze.

Germany also pledged to provide \$87 million in low-interest loans for farmers to restore degraded areas and \$34 million for Brazilian states in the Amazon region to protect the rainforest. “Despite all the difficulties, the increase in deforestation, the land grabbing, the fires, the dire state of the Indigenous populations, we see this as an opportunity to reverse this whole situation,” Lula also said during the news conference.

The announcement came shortly before German Chancellor Olaf Scholz landed in Brazil on Monday afternoon, making him the first Western leader to meet with Lula since the Brazilian president was inaugurated earlier this month.

The left-wing leader, who narrowly defeated Bolsonaro in an October runoff election, has pledged to fight for “zero deforestation” in the Amazon, roughly two-thirds of which lies in Brazil. The rainforest is critical to the global fight against climate change and rights groups had denounced the Bolsonaro administration’s policies as leading to an uptick in destruction, as well as rising threats against Indigenous communities in the region.

Deforestation in the Brazilian section of the rainforest rose 150 percent in December from the previous year, according to government figures, to 218.4sq km (84.3sq miles) of destroyed forest cover.

Following Lula’s election victory, Greenpeace Brazil had called on the new Brazilian government to rebuild the government agencies tasked with protecting the environment – a measure it called “urgent.” Human Rights Watch also urged Lula to put human rights at the centre of his policies and to strengthen “law enforcement to fight the destruction of the Amazon and threats and attacks against forest defenders”.

On Monday, Lula said money from the Amazon Fund would be used in emergencies, including the Indigenous health crisis in northern Brazil, where the Yanomami people have been suffering from malnutrition and diseases brought to their region by the illegal gold mining industry.

“I have no doubt there was a genocidal attitude towards Indigenous communities,” he said, blaming the Bolsonaro administration for the neglect. Lula last week declared a medical emergency in the Yanomami territory, the country’s largest Indigenous reservation.

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