

Brazilian Amazon deforestation drops in Lula's first month in office

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Macaws sit on a tree in the Amazon rainforest in Manaus, Amazonas State, Brazil, October 26, 2022 [File: Bruno Kelly/Reuters]

Brasilia, February 11 (RHC)-- Deforestation in Brazil's section of the Amazon rainforest dropped by 61 percent in January, the first month in office for left-wing President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who has promised to relaunch environmental protection efforts.

Preliminary satellite data collected by the government's space research agency Inpe and released on Friday showed 167 sq km (64 sq miles) cleared in the region last month, down from the 430sq km (166 sq miles) lost in January 2022.

But experts cautioned that while the decrease was a good sign, it is still too early to say that the deforestation, which surged under Lula's predecessor, far-right Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, has been reversed. "It is positive to see such a relevant drop in January," WWF-Brazil conservation specialist Daniel Silva said. "However, it is still too early to talk about a trend reversal, as part of this drop may be related to greater cloud cover."

WWF-Brazil also pointed out that deforestation usually peaks in the dry season, beginning in June. "The action plans for prevention and control of deforestation and forest fires must be restructured as a matter of urgency so that Brazil rediscovers its role as an international environmental leader," said Frederico Machado, another specialist with the group.

Deforestation increased dramatically under Bolsonaro, who was narrowly defeated by Lula in October elections and had promoted more mining and economic development in Brazil's sprawling Amazon region.

Environmental and Indigenous rights groups had blamed the Bolsonaro administration's policies for the increase in deforestation and illicit activities in the Amazon, including illegal gold mining, as well as an uptick in violence against Indigenous communities in the area.

The Brazilian-administered Amazon Fund, supported mainly by Norway and Germany, was reactivated by environment minister Marina Silva the day she took office last month, after being frozen since 2019 under Bolsonaro.

In late January, German development minister Svenja Schulze announced that Berlin would make \$38m available for the Amazon Fund, saying Lula's administration offered "a great chance to protect the forest and to offer a new perspective to the people who live there".

Germany also pledged to provide \$87 million in low-interest loans for farmers to restore degraded areas and \$34m for Brazilian states in the Amazon region to protect the rainforest. Yet even with the positive start to the year, experts and staff at Brazil's environmental agency Ibama have warned that it may take years for Lula to deliver on conservation targets after Bolsonaro cut funding and staff at key agencies.

Still, the new Brazilian government has already taken some steps in its push to reverse environmental degradation in the Amazon. Earlier this week, the authorities launched raids to remove illegal gold miners from Indigenous territories in the region, where they have been blamed for violent attacks and a health crisis affecting the Yanomami people.

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