

Brazil issues fire ban, redeploys military to fight Amazon blazes

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Protests against Bolsonaro's policies in the Amazon?

Brasilia, June 30 (RHC)-- As Brazil reels from its worst drought in decades, President Jair Bolsonaro has issued a broad 120-day ban on unauthorised outdoor fires ahead of the annual burning season in the Amazon rainforest.

The decree, published in the official government gazette, comes just days after Bolsonaro redeployed the military in an effort to stop deforestation in the world's largest rainforest.

Deforestation has soared under the far-right leader, hitting a 12-year-high in 2020 as an area seven times the size of London was cut down, according to the National Institute for Space Research (INPE). Last year the region also recorded the most fires since 2017, the agency said.

Bolsonaro has been widely criticised for his “exploitative” approach to natural resources and faces international outcry that Brazil is not doing enough to stop destruction of the Amazon, a vital bulwark to climate change.

The Brazilian military deployment will be restricted to 26 municipalities in four states – Amazonas, Mato Grosso, Pará and Rondônia. Previous deployments were for the entire Amazon region. Bolsonaro authorised the current deployment until the end of August. Neither policy has previously been effective in lowering deforestation or forest fires. Generally, criminals first cut down the valuable timber and later set fire to the area, clearing it for future agricultural use in speculative land grabs.

Brazilian Environment Minister Ricardo Salles resigned on June 24 during a criminal investigation into whether he obstructed a police probe of illegal logging in the Amazon. Salles had acted as the lead negotiator in talks with US President Joe Biden’s administration to secure a deal to protect the rainforest during the Leaders Summit on Climate in April, though those negotiations stalled.

Bolsonaro had wanted billions of dollars upfront, but Indigenous groups and climate activists in Brazil warned no money should be given to the Brazilian president. As deforestation continues, scientists warn the risk of fires is greater this year due to extreme drought, with many parts of the Amazon recording drier weather than last year. Between September and May, hydroelectric plants across the country have reported the lowest water inflows in 91 years, according to the Mines and Energy Ministry.

The non-profit Amazon Environmental Research Institute (IPAM) warned in a statement that global weather patterns heighten the risk of fires. “To make matters worse, this is a year affected by La Niña, which especially makes it dry in the southern Amazon,” IPAM said, adding that this “expands the window of deforestation and burning.”

Fire season, which generally peaks in August and September, is beginning to accelerate, with 23 major fires recorded so far this year, according to Matt Finer, who leads a fire tracking project for the Amazon Conservation non-profit.

All the fires have been in Mato Grosso state at the southeastern edge of the Amazon, Finer told Reuters news agency.

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