

EARTH'S BURNING LUNGS: ON AMAZON'S RAINFOREST FIRE

Relevant for: Environment | Topic: Environmental Degradation - GHGs, Ozone Depletion and Climate Change

The [Amazon rainforest](#), the largest of its kind in the world, is ablaze, with over [9,500 distinct fires burning through its main basin](#) since August 15. Overall, Brazil has seen [more than 76,000 fires ravage the Amazon in 2019](#), of which around 10,000 have been started in the past few weeks, mainly by loggers and farmers seeking, as they do during the summer months, to clear vast tracts for agricultural or industrial use. However, this annual exercise of planned deforestation appears to have crossed a tipping point this year. There has been an increase of at least 80% in the number of recorded fires compared to the same period in 2018, according to Brazil's National Institute for Space Research (INPE). This week, images of darkening skies above Sao Paulo, more than 2,700 km away from the fires, went viral. The number and intensity of the fires are closely linked to the rate of deforestation. Some reports estimate that in July 2019, the Amazon shrunk by 1,345 sq km, up 39% from the same month last year, and a historical record. The flames are not confined just to Brazil either. In neighbouring Bolivia, deadly blazes are devastating forests and farmlands, so much so, that its President, Evo Morales, has put his re-election campaign on hold over the weekend, and, unlike his Brazilian counterpart Jair Bolsonaro, was quick to welcome foreign aid to help fight the fires.

The distinctly political undertones of the crisis in Brazil sets it apart. Mr. Bolsonaro's critics say that his economic and environmental policies have virtually set the stage for intensifying degradation of the Amazon's rich biodiversity. They argue that since he came to power this year, he has chipped away at the protections that the rainforest enjoyed, including by weakening the environment ministry when he made Ricardo Salles, found guilty of administrative improprieties for altering a map to benefit mining companies, the Environment Minister; by driving away Norway and Germany, principal donors who have backed protections for the Amazon; by sacking the head INPE over absurd allegations that he was disclosing how rapidly Amazon deforestation was happening; and by attacking both environmental charities, alleging without proof that they started fires to serve certain foreign interests, and indigenous Amazon dwellers. Under intense global pressure, including from the ongoing G-7 meetings of world leaders, Mr. Bolsonaro, a right-wing climate-change sceptic, appears to have relented to an extent, and has authorised 44,000 military troops to help with the firefighting efforts. Even if they succeed, and the Bolsonaro administration ultimately bends to global outrage over the destruction of a critical global ecosystem, the discernible shift in Brazilian public institutions responsible for guarding the future of the Amazon rainforest is a worrying sign of worse things to come.

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