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Amazon deforestation accelerates



A deforested area in northern Brazil (file pic)

High soy and cattle prices may have contributed to the rise in illegal logging

The destruction of the Amazon rainforest in Brazil has accelerated for the first time in four years, Brazilian officials say.

Satellite images show 11,968 sq km of land was cleared in the year to July, nearly 4% higher than the year before.

The government said the figure was unsatisfactory but could have been a lot worse if it had not taken action against illegal logging.

High commodity prices had allegedly tempted farmers to clear more land.

In recent years the Brazilian government has been able to celebrate three successive falls in deforestation.

But the latest estimate from the National Institute for Space Research, known as INPE, shows that this trend has come to a halt.

'Could be worse'

Gilberto Camara of the Space Research Institute, said they would have liked better news.

"We believe it is a setback, but we believe it is also positive in the sense that the expected levels were much higher," Mr Camara said.

"There was a lot of burning on the ground in the second half of 2007, which could have led to a much greater increase in deforestation."

In late 2007 and early 2008 there were signs that deforestation was on the rise again - with land said to be in demand for cattle and soya at a time when commodity prices were high, says the BBC's Garry Duffy in Sao Paulo.

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Carlos Minc

Brazilian Environment Minister

In response the government announced a series of measures to clamp down on illegal logging, including a major operation involving police and environmental inspectors known as the "Arc of Fire".

Brazil's Environment Minister, Carlos Minc, said that without actions like this, the figures could have been much higher.

"Many had expected an increase of 30-40% and we managed to stabilise it," Mr Minc told a news conference.

But he said that the government was still not satisfied.

"We want to lower numbers even more. We want zero deforestation."

Environmental groups will be watching the situation carefully to see if the resolve and the resources they say are needed to protect the Amazon region are in place, our correspondent says.