Amazon fires: Seven countries sign forest protection pact
8 hours ago

Seven South American countries have agreed measures to protect the Amazon river basin, amid global concern over massive fires in the world's largest tropical forest.

Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru and Suriname signed a pact, setting up a disaster response network and satellite monitoring. At a summit in Colombia, they also agreed to work on reforestation.

More than 80,000 fires have broken out in the Amazon rainforest this year.

"This meeting will live on as a co-ordination mechanism for the presidents that share this treasure - the Amazon," said Colombian President Iván Duque, who hosted the summit in the city of Leticia.

Meanwhile, Peruvian President Martín Vizcarra said: "Goodwill alone is not enough anymore."

The seven nations also agreed to put more efforts into education and increase the role of indigenous communities.

The countries were represented in Leticia by presidents, vice-presidents and ministers. Brazil's far-right President Jair Bolsonaro took part by videolink because he was preparing for surgery.

What's the background to this?

The Amazon is a vital carbon store that slows down the pace of global warming, and 60% of it is located in Brazil. The number of fires between January and August 2019 is double that of the same period last year, according to the country's National Institute for Space Research (Inpe).

President Bolsonaro has drawn intense domestic and international criticism for failing to protect the region.
President Bolsonaro responds to criticism about his previous comments on the Amazon fire

Environmentalists say his policies have led to an increase in fires this year and that he has encouraged cattle farmers to clear vast swathes of the rainforest since his election last October.

Bolivia has also seen fires rage across the forest near its borders with Brazil and Paraguay.

Meanwhile, Brazil's leading meat export industry group and agricultural businesses have joined an environmental campaign calling for an end to deforestation in public lands in the Amazon and demanding government action.

Several international retailers have said they are suspending purchases of Brazilian leather because of the links between cattle ranching and the fires devastating parts of the Amazon rainforest.

Amazon countries sign pact to better protect the rainforest

Indigenous leaders and analysts remain cautiously optimistic about pact, saying it is thin on details and directives.

by Steven Grattan
7 Sept 2019

Leaders and officials from seven Amazonian countries attended the one-day summit [Steven Grattan/Al Jazeera]

**Leticia, Colombia** - Leaders of countries home to the vast Amazon signed a pact on Friday aimed at sharing resources and taking greater steps to protect the world's largest tropical rainforest.

The talks, led by Colombian President Ivan Duque, took place in Leticia, the Colombian region home to part of the Amazon rainforest.

According to the "Leticia Amazon pact", the Amazonian countries will "strengthen
coordinated action", "establish [a] regional cooperation mechanism", "increase efforts associated with monitoring forest cover", and "strengthen the capacities and participation of indigenous and tribal peoples", among other actions. The pact was thin on specifics, however.

Among those in attendance at Friday’s meeting were Peruvian President Martin Vizcarra, Ecuadorian President Lenin Moreno and Bolivian President Evo Morales, as well as the Suriname Vice President Michael Adhin, Brazilian Foreign Minister Ernesto Araujo and Guyana Natural Resource Minister Raphael Trotman. Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro who said he was unable to travel due to his health, joined via video conference. Venezuela was not invited to the meeting.

The meeting came against a backdrop of growing international outrage over the surge in wildfires raging in parts of the Amazon. Environmentalists blame the policies and weakened restrictions of Brazil's Bolsonaro for the increased deforestation. Bolsonaro wants to open up the rainforest for commercial exploration. Fires have also broken out in Bolivia.

"We understand the urgency to protect this region, we understand that there are threats in the region, and that they are basically all the same in the countries meeting here today," Duque said.

"It's no surprise to anyone that in recent decades we've lost thousands of hectares of tropical rainforest because of the illegal expansion of the agricultural frontier as well as illegal extraction of minerals and the planting of illicit crops," he added.

Duque called on all the leaders present to work together to combat deforestation and share timely information on the protection of the Amazon.

"When a brother country needs help, we should all do our best to help in these emergencies," Duque said.

Peru’s Vizcarra agreed, saying, "If we look back at what’s been done over the past 40 years, it isn’t satisfactory. As a result we’ll change the strategy." Peru has the fourth-largest amount of tropical forest in the world and second in Latin America, after Brazil.

Bolsonaro via video said that the pact affirmed each country’s sovereignty.

'Pact is very vague'
The presidents were joined by indigenous leaders whose communities were most affected by deforestation and the fires in the Amazon.

'Rounded, afraid': The indigenous guardians of Brazil’s Amazon

Nelly Kuiru, coordinator of the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia, expressed doubts over the leaders' commitment to protecting the rainforest.

"It’s a critical moment for the Amazon in terms of the environment and social issues with indigenous villagers that live in this territory," she told Al Jazeera in Leticia.

"I think it is important the presidents took the time to come to one of the Amazon’s regions, in Colombia, and sign the pact. But I have doubts about it," she added. "I doubt the pact will be fulfilled, because to make a pact there first of all has to be an analysis of what is happening."

She added that the pact itself was "very vague".

It is "very abstract and the Amazon region is not abstract, it is a lot more than just rainforest. There is a lot of biodiversity and cultural diversity and of the 102 indigenous villages that exist in Colombia, 69 are found in the Colombian Amazon," she said.

Sergio Guzman, Director of Colombia Risk Analysis, said, "There is this impotence for action in the international community and these presidents want to show that they care"
and that they're doing something.

"A meeting in the Amazon is all fair and good, a great photo opportunity, but it doesn't give me a lot of hope for swift change," he added, via phone.

Ricardo Lozano, Colombia's environment minister, told reporters in Leticia strengthening cooperation was key.

He said to do this, he hopes the region can build an Amazon network to work in a "more accelerated" way to have better forecasts, share information on illegal activities in the region and also educate themselves and each other about the communities of the region.

SOURCE: AL JAZEERA NEWS

Amazon Watch Statement on the "Amazon Pact" Issued Today by South American Leaders

SEPTEMBER 6, 2019

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Amazon Watch

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:
Rania Batrice at +1.510.394.2041 or rania@amazonwatch.org

Today the presidents of Brazil, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, and Suriname met in Leticia, Colombia to discuss regional cooperation for the Amazon. They issued this "Amazon Pact" at the end of the meeting, which laid out their agreed-upon commitments.

Amazon Watch’s Moira Birss made the following statement in response to the Pact:

"While it is a positive sign that governments of the Amazon region met to discuss joint cooperation to ‘conserve’ the Amazon rainforest, the text of the pact does more to raise questions and concerns than it does to reassure the world that the Amazon will be protected.

"A key red flag in the text is its description of the causes of forest degradation and deforestation; the text does not actually name any specific cause and only very vaguely references a possible link between Amazon deforestation and climate change. This is problematic both because ample scientific research has demonstrated the serious climate impacts of tropical forest deforestation, and because the direct causes of Amazon deforestation and degradation are widely known to be industrial activities like agribusiness and mining.

"Furthermore, the pact's frequent mention of the ‘value’ of the trees and biodiversity of the Amazon, and of the ‘development’ of
its natural resources, seem to indicate that the signatories view the rainforest as a commodity to be exploited rather than a vital ecosystem and the ancestral home to indigenous peoples that must be protected.

"This reading of the pact is supported by recent events: this week the Bolsonaro administration has pushed for even more rollbacks to environmental protections in the country's Forest Code, and Ecuador's new Environment Minister declared on Wednesday that, "where there are natural resources, there will be extraction.""

"Responses to the Amazon fires will never be effective in protecting the rainforest unless they confront the key driver of Amazon deforestation: profit-seeking at the expense of the rights of forest peoples and environmental protection."

**Leticia's Pact for the Amazon**

Release

September 6, 2019 - 2:16 pm

**Joint Statement 028-19**

The Heads of State and Heads of Delegation of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, the Federative Republic of Brazil, the Republic of Colombia, the Republic of Ecuador, the Republic of Guyana, the Republic of Peru and the Republic of Suriname meeting in Leticia, Colombia, the September 6, 2019:

Reaffirming the sovereign rights of the countries of the Amazon region over their territories and their natural resources, including the development and sustainable use of those resources, as recognized by international law;

Aware of the value of the Amazon for the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity, as well as, of its tropical humid forests, source of 20% of the planet's fresh water and climate regulator,
which provides essential ecosystem services for the sustainable development of Amazonian populations;

Bearing in mind that more than 34 million people live in the Amazon, including indigenous and tribal peoples and peoples in voluntary isolation and initial contact (PIACI) possessors of ancestral knowledge, traditional knowledge and cultural and linguistic diversity, which must be protected;

Reaffirming all the principles of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, taking into account the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, including the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capacities, in light of the different national circumstances, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Convention to Combat Desertification and Land Degradation, the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora; the Minamata Convention on Mercury; as well as regional treaties, such as the principles and purposes of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty and other relevant international agreements for the sustainable development of the Amazon and global ecosystems;

Aware of the importance of the implementation and generation of synergies between the 2030 Agenda and its Objectives for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement and the process of building a global framework for biodiversity after 2020;

Reaffirming that for the conservation and sustainable development of the Amazon, the efforts of the Amazon countries are required, and expressing concern about deforestation and forest degradation that is caused by different causes in each of the countries, taking into account their respective regulatory frameworks, including the causes of deforestation that, according to the necessary evidence, could be associated with climate change and its structural factors, and expressing its commitment to increase national and regional efforts to address this problem in a comprehensive and urgent manner;

Reaffirming that cooperation between Amazonian countries is an important condition for the conservation of the Amazon, which generates opportunities for sustainable development and the well-being of its population;

Considering that, although there are established financial mechanisms and programs, including multilateral banking, which complement the efforts of the Amazonian countries and contribute to the solution of these challenges, it is necessary to increase the provision and mobilization of financial resources to comply with the Commitments made within the framework of these mechanisms to achieve this objective;

Encouraging the international community to cooperate for the conservation and sustainable development of the Amazon, based on respect for their respective national sovereignty, priorities
and interests, we decided to sign the present:

COURT OF LETICIA FOR THE AMAZON

1. Strengthen coordinated action for the valuation of forests and biodiversity, as well as to combat deforestation and forest degradation, based on national policies and their respective regulatory frameworks.

2. Establish mechanisms for regional cooperation and information exchange to combat illegal activities that threaten the conservation of the Amazon.

3. Create the Amazon Network for Natural Disaster Cooperation among the Emergency Operations Centers to coordinate and articulate national disaster prevention and care systems in order to effectively address regional impact emergencies, such as large forest fires scale.

4. Exchange and implement experiences in the integral management of fire, promoting the development of policies, instruments and technical actions, based on the prevention of forest fires, the promotion of alternatives to the use of fire in rural areas and the strengthening of technical capacities, scientific and institutional.

5. Specify accelerated restoration, rehabilitation and reforestation initiatives in areas degraded by forest fires and illegal activities including the illegal extraction of minerals with a view to mitigating the impact, and recovery of species and ecosystem functionality.

6. Increase efforts associated with monitoring forest cover and other strategic ecosystems in the region in order to have periodic reports, in particular, regarding the generation of an early warning system for deforestation and degradation to act with a preventive approach.

7. Exchange information to improve the monitoring capabilities of climate, biodiversity, water and hydrobiological resources of the region under a watershed and community-based approach.

8. Promote initiatives for connectivity of priority ecosystems and protection figures for biodiversity conservation through sustainable use, restoration and landscape management, respecting national sovereignty.

9. Exchange and implement experiences in the integrated management of protected area systems of Amazonian countries at the regional, national and sub-national levels for their effective management and for the benefit of local populations, through the promotion of program development and/or conservation and sustainable use projects.

10. Strengthen the mechanisms that support and promote the sustainable use of the forest, sustainable productive systems, patterns of production and responsible consumption and that promote value chains and other approaches to sustainable production, including those based on
biodiversity.

11. Promote joint actions aimed at the empowerment of women living in the Amazon region to strengthen their active participation in the conservation and sustainable development of the Amazon.

12. Strengthen the capacities and participation of indigenous and tribal peoples and local communities in the sustainable development of the Amazon, recognizing their fundamental role in the conservation of the region.

13. Promote research, technological development, technology transfer and knowledge management processes with the purpose of guiding the appropriate decision making and promoting the development of sustainable environmental, social and economic enterprises.

14. Develop and articulate among the Amazonian countries education and awareness raising activities on the role and function of the Amazon, the main challenges and threats it faces for its conservation and sustainable use of forests and the protection of traditional knowledge of forests. communities that inhabit it; as well as on disaster risk scenarios for strengthening the resilience of Amazonian populations.

15. Work together to strengthen financial programs and mechanisms, claim the commitments of the countries assumed in these spaces, mobilize public and private resources, including Multilateral Banking, as appropriate, for the implementation of this Pact.

16. Fast forward in the formulation of the second phase of the Amazon Sustainable Landscapes Program to the Global Environment Facility.

WE DECLARE:

Our willingness to host the present Leticia Pact for the Amazon.

Our commitment to coordinate, through the Foreign Ministry and the competent authorities, the formulation of an action plan for the development of the actions taken, as well as to carry out follow-up meetings to evaluate the progress in the formulation and implementation of said plan.

Our intention to cooperate and our call to other interested States, to the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO) and other regional and international organizations to cooperate in order to achieve the actions agreed here, building in harmony with national efforts and in attention to the requests of the Amazonian countries signatory to this Covenant and with full respect for their sovereignty.

Amazon fires are 'true apocalypse', says Brazilian archbishop

Erwin Kräutler says he expects next month's papal synod to denounce destruction of rainforest
The fires in the Amazon are a “true apocalypse”, according to a Brazilian archbishop who expects next month’s papal synod at the Vatican to strongly denounce the destruction of the rainforest.

The comments by Erwin Kräutler will put fresh pressure on the Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, following criticism from G7 leaders last month over the surge of deforestation in the world’s biggest terrestrial carbon sink.

The archbishop’s words also highlight a widening division between the Catholic church and the Pentecostal movement. Pope Francis has championed a more harmonious relationship with the natural world for the sake of future generations, in contrast to the fast-growing new-world Pentecostalists who form the support base for the ramped-up resource exploitation advocated by Bolsonaro and Donald Trump.

The gathering of bishops would condemn all forms of Amazon destruction and advocate a new view of ecology based on Christian faith in God as the creator of a “common home”, Kräutler said in an email exchange with the Guardian. Although retired as a bishop of Xingu, he is one of 18 members of the preparatory council appointed by Francis ahead of next month’s papal synod on the Amazon.

Following the meeting, Francis is expected to reinforce this message with an “apostolic exhortation”. It is likely to build on his influential 180-page encyclical on climate change, Laudato Si’, published four years ago, which called for concrete steps to tackle the environmental crisis.

Preparations for an Amazon synod have been under way since 2016, but the issue has become more urgent in recent months due to fires, threats and a hostile government, Kräutler said.

“There have always been fires in the Amazon. When they are smaller, nature rebuilds itself within a few years. But what you are seeing now is a true apocalypse,” said the archbishop, who has spent 54 years in the region.

“The fires this year surpass anything you can imagine. Undoubtedly, it is the consequence of comments by [Bolsonaro] about the opening of the Amazon to national and multinational companies. He understands ‘opening the Amazon’ as a licence to clear a rainforest and gain space for cattle to graze and plant monocultures such as soybeans and sugar cane.”

Earlier this week, Catholic clergy in the Amazon released an open letter condemning violence and intimidation they say they are experiencing as a result of efforts to protect the forest, indigenous people and poor communities from miners and farmers.

“We are deeply disappointed that today, instead of being supported and encouraged, our leaders are criminalised as enemies of the fatherland,” they wrote.

“Together with Pope Francis, we are uncompromisingly defending the Amazon and demanding urgent measures from governments in the face of violent and irrational aggression against nature and the destruction of the forest that kills ancient flora and fauna with criminal fires.”

Kräutler said the letter was necessary because the government had spread false rumours that the Catholic church was undermining Brazilian sovereignty.
Priests and nuns have a long history of working with poor communities in the Amazon, which has often put them at odds with powerful business interests and the authorities. During the 1970s, the Liberation theology movement was closely aligned with leftwing resistance to the military dictatorship of the time.

In 2005, the America nun Dorothy Stang was murdered by landowners. One of her followers, Father Amaro Lopes, was arrested last year in the Xingu River basin. Kräutler had so many death threats he needed police protection for more than 10 years.

Tensions have risen further since Bolsonaro – a former military officer who has defended the use of torture and killings during the 20-year dictatorship that ended in 1985 – became president.

He has weakened government protections of the rainforest, verbally attacked indigenous groups, accused environmental NGOs of starting fires and broken ties with foreign donors to the Amazon Fund. In July – when deforestation alerts jumped by 278% compared with the same month last year – he fired the head of the space agency that provided the data.

On Saturday, Bolsonaro confirmed that he wanted the Brazilian intelligence agency to conduct surveillance on the Amazon synod. “There is a lot of political influence there,” the president reportedly told journalists.

Although nominally a Catholic, Bolsonaro was baptised a few years ago by evangelical pastors in Israel. His rise to power has depended heavily on support from the Pentecostal movement, which is growing far more rapidly than the Catholic church.

A primary goal of the synod is to increase the ability of the Catholic church to evangelise in the Amazon and – although unstated – to counter the rise of Pentecostalism, which tends to support resource exploitation and has made inroads among indigenous and riverine communities. But bishops have been hamstrung by the difficulty of finding priests willing to work in the remote region.

One of the more radical ideas in a preparatory document for the synod, *Instrumentum Laboris*, is to allow older married men to be ordained – a move which would end a centuries-old requirement that priests are celibate.

Francis has previously said he would be open to allowing married men to be ordained in areas where there is a scarcity of priests, but the idea is highly controversial among Vatican conservatives, with cardinals having described it as “heretical” and “apostasy”.

*Instrumentum Laboris* also laments the crisis in the Amazon, which it attributes to “secularisation, the throwaway culture and the idolatry of money”.

“Today the Amazon is wounded, its beauty deformed, a place of pain and violence,” it continues. “The manifold destruction of human and environmental life, the diseases and pollution of rivers and lands, the felling and burning of trees, the massive loss of biodiversity, the disappearance of species (more than 1m of the 8m animals and plants are at risk), constitute a brutal reality that challenges us all.

“Violence, chaos and corruption are rampant. The territory has become a space of discord and of extermination of peoples, cultures and generations.”

**Amazon fires: Jair Bolsonaro to miss summit for surgery**

Brazil’s President Jair Bolsonaro will miss a planned summit on the fires ravaging the Amazon rainforest to prepare for surgery, an aide has said.

The operation will be the far-right leader’s fourth after he was stabbed in the stomach during his presidential election campaign in 2018.

Brazil may send a representative in his place or ask for the summit to be postponed, the spokesman said.

More than 80,000 fires have broken out in the Amazon rainforest this year.

Mr Bolsonaro has drawn intense domestic and international criticism for failing to protect the region, which is a vital carbon store that slows the pace of global warming.

Environmentalists blame policies enacted by the Brazilian president for the 77% increase in fires this year compared with the same period in 2018. They say he has encouraged cattle farmers to clear vast swathes of the rainforest since his election.

The controversial leader was elected to the presidency in October 2018, a month after he was stabbed at a campaign rally.
Jair Bolsonaro: Brazil presidential front-runner stabbed at rally

His surgery is to correct an incisional hernia and is his fourth operation since the attack. The surgery is scheduled for Sunday, and Mr Bolsonaro must start a liquid diet on Friday - the day of the regional conference in Colombia. Doctors said he would need 10 days of rest after the treatment.

Speaking to reporters outside his official residence, the president vowed on Monday to defend his Amazon policy "even in a wheelchair" at a UN General Assembly meeting on 24 September.

"I will appear because I want to talk about the Amazon," he said.

Mr Bolsonaro has accused other nations of colonialism for offering $20 million to help tackle the fires.
Why Brazilian farmers are burning the rainforest — and why it’s difficult for Bolsonaro to stop them

An aerial view of a burned tract of the Amazon rainforest as it was cleared by loggers and farmers near Porto Velho, Brazil, on Aug. 29. (Ricardo Moraes/Reuters)

By Marina Lopes
September 8 at 6:00 AM

SAO PAULO — Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, under international pressure to curb the fires now spiking across the Amazon, is trying to crack down on the farmers and loggers who clear land by burning the rainforest.

But he’s up against long-standing traditions, practices, laws — and some of his own rhetoric.

Farmers in Brazil use fire to clear land. A decades-old law encourages them to invade the Amazon. And Bolsonaro, backed by Brazil’s powerful agricultural lobby, campaigned on promises to open the rainforest to more farming, logging and mining — and against what he called “an industry of fines” at Ibama, the environmental protection agency.

“I won’t allow Ibama to go around issuing fines left and right,” the climate-change skeptic said shortly after his election last year. “The party is going to end.”

And he delivered: Since he took office in January, the agency says it has issued 29.4 percent fewer fines for violations, including illegal burning and deforestation.

But now Bolsonaro is trying to apply the brakes. He has declared a 60-day ban on the fires. He has sent troops to northern Brazil to crack down on deforestation. And authorities are
investigating reports of coordinated arsons last month in what farmers and loggers on social media called a “Day of Fire.”

But there, again, is the conundrum for Bolsonaro: Rural leaders in the Amazon of Pará state allegedly organized the fires along a highway across the rainforest to show support for Bolsonaro’s loosening of environmental restrictions, the newspaper Globo Rural reported.

Farmers have long used fire to cut through jungle too dense for machines. The burned vegetation makes the soil fertile and cuts down on pests. But fire also plays a key role in illegal deforestation.

“Fires mark one of the last stages in deforestation,” said Raoni Rajão, a professor of environmental management at the Federal University of Minas Gerais. “First, the expensive wood is removed. Then, the bush is left to dry. Finally, fires are set to clear the land before grass can be planted for pasture.”

Brazilian farmers say they’re being blamed unfairly for the fires. Marcos da Rosa, a former president of Brazil’s Soy Producers Association, said they’re often caused by inexperienced settlers, who use fires to clear land without understanding the risks.

“The guy sparks a fire to clear one or two hectares outside his house and the wind comes and spreads it,” said da Rosa, a soy and cattle farmer. “Suddenly, it takes over his whole pasture.”

More experienced farmers stopped using fire to clear land decades ago because it can be so difficult to manage, he said.

Brazil has long provided incentives for farmers to move into, burn and develop the Amazon.

The government owns vast, uninhabited swaths of the rainforest. In an effort to settle that land in the 1970s, lawmakers approved legislation that allows squatters who can establish economic activity on a parcel for five years to buy the title at a discount.

Fire allows farmers to clear land for pasture quickly and cheaply.

“There is this Wild West logic to the law in the Amazon,” Rajão said. “The idea was that Brazil must integrate the Amazon to maintain control over it.”
In 2017, pressured by the country’s agricultural lobby, lawmakers expanded the law to allow for the privatization of larger patches of land. Last year, the government issued 90,000 such land titles throughout the country, according to the Ministry of Agriculture.

Speculation has also fueled deforestation. The risk of being fined by Ibama pales in comparison to the potential profits. Deforested land in the Amazon that has been converted to pasture can be sold at up to six times the price paid to the government, Rajão said.

“On the one hand, you give concrete incentives for deforestation, and even subsidize it,” he said. “On the other, you fine people who get caught doing it. It creates a logic of outsmarting the system.”

Farmers take advantage during periods of lax government oversight to grab and deforest more land. The activity has grown under Bolsonaro: Through July, deforestation was up 40 percent, compared with the same period last year, Brazil’s National Institute for Space Research reported last month.

In an open letter to the government, more than 400 Ibama employees warned that the country’s environmental protection system was on the brink of collapse — and blamed the fires on cuts in resources. They said the agency’s budget was cut by 45 percent from 2010 to 2019.

“We cannot dissociate these factors from the clear increase in deforestation and fires,” they wrote.

Now Brazilian police are investigating reports that more than 70 farmers and loggers used a WhatsApp group to organize the Day of Fire on Aug. 10.

More than 30,000 fires burned in the rainforest in August alone, a nine-year high, according to the space research institute.

The fires have prompted activists to call for boycotts of Brazilian goods. Fifteen fashion labels, including Vans, Kipling and Timberland, have said they will not import Brazilian leather. Finland
has called for a ban on Brazilian beef imports to the European Union.

An aerial view of a burned tract of the Amazon near Porto Velho, Brazil, on Aug. 29. The government owns vast, uninhabited swaths of the rainforest. (Ricardo Moraes/Reuters)

Now Bolsonaro is under pressure from the agricultural lobby that helped get him elected to ease tensions with the international community before boycotts affect their profits.

Bolsonaro has said farmers and loggers would no longer be allowed to use fires to clear land. But critics said the efforts would be hard to enforce without changes. Ibama is unable to effectively patrol a rainforest that covers 60 percent of Brazil’s territory.

Governors of the Amazon states have warned that land ownership laws must be rewritten before they can clamp down on deforestation.

“Without land reform, we have great difficulty holding accountable the people who commit this crime,” Wilson Lima, governor of Amazonas state, told Bolsonaro in a meeting last month. “We don’t know exactly whose land it is.”
'Chaos, chaos, chaos': a journey through Bolsonaro's Amazon inferno

A 2,000km road and river odyssey in Brazil reveals consensus from all sides: Bolsonaro has ushered in a new age of wrecking

by Tom Phillips in Palmeiras, Rondônia state. Photographs by Avener Prado

Mon 9 Sep 2019 07.30 BST

Last modified on Mon 9 Sep 2019 11.22 BST
From afar it resembles a tornado: an immense grey column shooting thousands of feet upwards from the forest canopy into the Amazonian skies.

Up close it is an inferno: a raging conflagration obliterating yet another stretch of the world’s greatest rainforest as a herd of Nelore cattle looks on in bewilderment.

“It started this morning,” said Valdir Urumon, the chief of an indigenous village in this isolated corner of Rondônia state, as the vast pillar of smoke loomed over his settlement’s palm-thatched homes.

By late afternoon, when the Guardian arrived on the scene, the fire had intensified into a catastrophic blaze, streaking north through a strip of jungle perhaps two miles long.

Huge plumes of black, leaden and rust-coloured smoke drifted skywards as if this sweep of woodland near Brazil’s north-western border with Bolivia had been subjected to a ferocious bombing campaign.
At the farmhouse nearest to the blaze the lights were on but not a soul was to be seen – much less anyone who might extinguish the giant pyre.

But two empty petrol barrels and a cluster of plastic jerrycans dumped at its entrance hinted at a possible culprit – a cattle rancher torching yet another swath of the Brazilian jungle in order to expand his Amazon domain.

Three weeks after Brazil’s unusually severe burning season sparked an international storm, the far-right government of President Jair Bolsonaro has launched a global PR campaign designed to convince the world the situation is under control.

“The Amazon is not burning, not burning at all,” Brazil’s foreign minister, Ernesto Araújo, insisted in an interview with CNN.

Rondônia’s governor, a Bolsonaro ally called Marcos Rocha, took an identical line, dismissing the “fuss” over the fires as a foreign ruse to shackle Brazil’s economy.

“If we look at the situation in other countries, their forests are burning much more than here in our Brazil,” the retired police colonel claimed.
“You go to London, or other countries, and what do you see?” Rocha mused.

“It’s not fog – it’s smoke! Smoke from burning; from industry. So how can they demand of us what they haven’t done themselves?”

João Chrisóstomo, a Bolsonarian congressman in Rondônia’s capital, Porto Velho, rejected claims that under his leader Brazil was entering a new era of Amazon devastation and insisted – contrary to a growing body of evidence – that conservation was a top priority in Bolsonaro’s Brazil.

Statistics produced by Brazil’s own space institute – whose director was sacked last month after clashing with Bolsonaro – show deforestation has surged in recent months with a Manhattan-sized area lost every day in July.

But Chrisóstomo maintained Bolsonaro was “making every effort to stop unbridled deforestation” and chastised meddling European leaders such as France’s President Emmanuel Macron who have questioned Bolsonaro’s vision for the Amazon.

“He’s not Brazil’s president. He’s not even from the Americas,” the politician seethed.

“This forest isn’t shared, as he claims. It belongs to a nation which enjoys complete autonomy and authority to decide what happens to the forest and
tak extensively tries every possible care to preserve it.”

That last claim rang hollow this week as the Guardian travelled almost 2,000km by road and river through two of the Amazon states most affected by this year’s fires, Rondônia and Amazonas.

Along the way, an almost identical refrain emerged from the mouths of indigenous leaders, wildcat goldminers, environmental activists and government officials alike: that Jair Bolsonaro’s stripping back of environmental protections and anti-environmental rhetoric had contributed to the scale of this year’s fires – more than 30,000 of which were recorded in August alone – and set in motion a new age of wrecking that looks set to continue well beyond the end of the annual burning season next month.

“It is chaos. Chaos, chaos, chaos,” lamented one senior official from Brazil’s environmental agency, Ibama, who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

“If we go on like this, things will get worse and worse,” predicted the official, diplomatically blaming the spike in Amazon deforestation during Bolsonaro’s first eight months in power on the “political situation” in Brazil.

Life has never been easy for the activists and government agents seeking to slow rainforest destruction in a vast and often lawless region many still call Brazil’s “faroeste” (wild west).
In the riverside town of Humaitá in Amazonas state, Ibama’s former headquarters lies in ruins two years after it was stormed, ransacked and burned to the ground by illegal goldminers in retribution for a crackdown.

Now, as the dismantling of Brazil’s environmental protection system gathers pace, its operations there are to halt altogether.

Three regional Ibama offices – in the towns of Humaitá, Parintins and Tabatinga – are in the process of being deactivated, leaving only one central command post – in the capital, Manaus – to tackle environmental crime in a state three times the size of Spain.

In a recent letter to Ibama’s new president, several hundred officials voiced “immense concern” over the direction environmental protection was taking.

Márcio Tenharim, an indigenous leader from a reserve near Humaitá, said he feared the influx of soy farmers, ranchers and mining companies would accelerate as Brazil’s president pushed for such activities to be allowed on previously protected areas.

“We aren’t ready for this,” said Tenharim, predicting such “development” would bring “nothing but misery” for his people.
Bolsonaro denies that will be the case – and many in the region see his Amazon blueprint as a boon.

“He’s our hope for improvement,” said Martins Tavares, 33, a goldminer who said he and virtually all of his colleagues backed Bolsonaro, believing his promises to open up the Amazon would help them feed their families.

Rui Souza, the owner of waterside petrol station in Humaitá that sells to goldseekers, said he was also optimistic the president would do away with environmental and indigenous reserves so they could be commercially exploited.

An indigenous village called Panual near the community of Palmeiras in Rondônia state

“Our Amazonia is so rich, my friend. But we’re not allowed to use any of it,” the 65-year-old complained.

In Rondônia – where 72% of voters backed the far-right candidate in last year’s election – support is even more widespread. Bolsonarian billboards dot the highways declaring: “Together we will change the destiny of Rondônia and Brazil!”

“Nearly everyone here voted for him,” said Vicente Costa, a 69-year-old restaurant owner in the town of Araras whose silver SUV was plastered with
Bolsonaro stickers reading: “Change Brazil for real.”

That delight contrasts with the growing despair of many forest dwellers whose lives were upended in the 1960s when Brazil’s military dictatorship bulldozed roads through the Amazon.

“A forest fire near Palmeiras, an isolated town in the Amazon state of Rondônia.

“During his campaign Bolsonaro promised to divide up indigenous lands. That’s why the ranchers voted for him. But we don’t want to share our land,” said Valdillene Urumon, 28, as the fire continued to rage near her village.

“We felt sad [when Bolsonaro won],” Urumon added. “But now we have to fight, don’t we?”

Chrisóstomo insisted fears for the future of Brazil’s forests were “totally misplaced”.

But on the rural outskirts of Humaitá another blaze had broken out and as night fell two local firefighters battled in vain to contain it.

“The environment is so crucial to us, isn’t it?,“ one soot-faced firefighter said as he paused from smothering the flames with a rubber damper. “It saddens us to see it being destroyed like this.”
Firefighters from Amazonas state fight to put out a fire on the rural outskirts of Humaitá.

It was, as usual, impossible to know who had started the fire, or why. But the men struggling to douse it suspected criminal intent, warning the Guardian to leave in case the firestarter still lurked in the shadows.

As the flames ripped across a prairie his hose was not long enough to reach, the sergeant looked on in exhaustion and dismay.

“Every year we do campaigns [against fire-starting] but it’s as if the more campaigns you do the worse it gets,” he said.

“It leaves us with little faith humans will ever understand they need to protect the environment.”
US and Brazil agree to Amazon development

7 hours ago

The US and Brazil have agreed to promote private-sector development in the Amazon, during a meeting in Washington on Friday.

They also pledged a $100m (£80m) biodiversity conservation fund for the Amazon led by the private sector. Brazil's foreign minister said opening the rainforest to economic development was the only way to protect it.

Ernesto Araujo also hit back at criticism of Brazil's handling of the forest fires. He told reporters in Washington that claims the country is "not able to cope with the challenges" were false.

On Friday, Finland urged EU countries to consider stopping importing beef and soybeans from Brazil in order to put pressure on Brazil to tackle the fires. Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro has faced criticism for failing to protect the region.

More than 80,000 fires have broken out in the Amazon rainforest so far this year. Experts believe the majority of the fires across Brazil this year are caused by human activity such as farmers and loggers clearing land for crops or grazing.

Environmentalists say Mr Bolsonaro's policies have led to an increase in fires this year and that he has encouraged cattle farmers to clear large areas of the rainforest since his election last October.

Mr Araujo said: "We want to be together in the endeavour to create development for the Amazon region which we are convinced is the only way to protect the forest.

"So we need new initiatives, new productive initiatives, that create jobs, that create revenue for people in the Amazon and that's where our partnership with the United States will be very important for us."
US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the biodiversity investment fund would support businesses in hard to reach areas of the Amazon.

He added: "The Brazilians and the American teams will follow through on our commitment that our presidents made in March. We're getting off the ground a 100 million dollar, 11-year Impact Investment Fund for Amazon biodiversity conservation and that project will be led by the private sector."

Last week seven South American countries **agreed on measures to protect the Amazon river basin.** Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru and Suriname signed a pact, setting up a disaster response network and satellite monitoring.

At a summit in Colombia, they also agreed to work on reforestation.