Brazil's environment minister quits amid illegal logging investigation

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Scientists say the Amazon has suffered losses at an accelerated rate since President Jair Bolsonaro took office.

Brazil's environment minister has quit ahead of a criminal investigation into claims he obstructed a police inquiry into illegal logging in the Amazon. Ricardo Salles is accused of vouching for the legal origin of a vast haul of timber worth approximately $25m (£18m). This is despite police evidence that it had been illegally logged. Mr Salles is also facing a separate investigation into allegations that he was involved in the export of illegal timber to the US and Europe.

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"I understand that Brazil throughout this year and next, on the international stage and also nationally, needs to have a strong union of interests," Mr Salles said on Wednesday. "So that this can be done as smoothly as possible, I have submitted my resignation."

He has repeatedly defended record on protecting the rainforest, arguing that he had tried to find a balance between mining and agribusiness and the need to safeguard the Amazon.

In 2019, Mr Salles told the BBC: "Brazil has done an excellent job. We have 84% of the Amazon preserved as opposed to many other countries that criticise us, they have no forest anymore."

Conservationists have blamed the government of President Jair Bolsonaro for turning a blind eye to farmers and loggers clearing land in the Amazon, hastening deforestation. Mr Salles will be replaced by the ministry's secretary for the Amazon, Joaquim Alvaro Pereira Leite.