

Brazilian president Lula pledges ‘new Amazon dream’ at rainforest summit

Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva sets out ambitious programme to repair damage done by Bolsonaro and tackle environmental crime

Tom Phillips in *Belém*

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- Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva spoke at the first Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization meeting in 14 years. Photograph: Eraldo Peres/AP

The Brazilian president, **Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva**, has vowed to haul the Amazon out of centuries of violence, economic “plundering” and environmental devastation and into “a new Amazon dream”, at the start of a major regional summit on the world’s largest rainforest.

Addressing **South American leaders gathered in the Brazilian city of Belém**, Lula offered a bold blueprint for the future of the Amazon, a 6.7m sq km region that is home to nearly 50 million people spread across eight countries and one territory.

The Brazilian leftist promised to repair his country’s environmental and international reputation after four “disastrous” years under his predecessor,

Jair Bolsonaro, during which the rainforest and Indigenous communities came under growing attack. “Thankfully ... we have managed to **turn this sad page in our history**,” said Lula, who took power in January after thwarting Bolsonaro’s re-election plans.

Lula pledged to promote an ambitious model for the rainforest region – 60% of which lies within **Brazil** – in which environmental protection was accompanied by desperately needed social inclusion, economic growth and technological innovation.

“The rainforest is neither a void that needs occupying nor a treasure trove to be looted. It is a flowerbed of possibilities that must be cultivated,” Lula told the audience, which included the presidents of fellow Amazon nations Bolivia, Colombia and Peru, as well as the prime minister of Guyana and Venezuela’s vice-president.

Pledging to achieve zero deforestation by 2030, Lula said: “The Amazon can be whatever we want it to be: an Amazon with greener cities, with cleaner air, with mercury-free rivers and forests that are left standing; an Amazon with food on the table, dignified jobs and public services that are available to all; an Amazon with healthier children, well-received migrants [and] Indigenous people who are respected ... This is our Amazon dream.”



Indigenous communities demand greater change as Amazon rainforest summit begins – video

The comments came at the start of a rare two-day meeting of the eight-member Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization (Acto), which Lula called as part of efforts to reposition Brazil on the world stage as a key player in the fight against the climate crisis.

Among the issues being discussed at Acto's first such meeting in 14 years were a possible deal to halt deforestation by 2030 and joint efforts to fight rampant illegal mining and organised crime groups that are tightening their grip on the rainforest region. Colombia's president, Gustavo Petro, has been pushing for an end to oil and gas exploration in the Amazon, although Brazilian moves to develop an oilfield near the mouth of the Amazon River complicate those efforts.

Petro used his intervention to call for the creation of "an Amazonian Nato" under which regional military would join forces to protect the jungle, about 6% of which lies within Colombia's borders.

"You defend life with reason – but also with weapons," he said, also proposing a "Marshall Plan" to pump resources into Amazon protection and a specialised Amazonian court to punish crimes against the biome.

Dina Boluarte, the president of Peru, home to about 11% of the Amazon, also urged action to preserve a rainforest that "isn't just the lungs of the world – it's the heart of the world".

"We must act now. There is no time to lose," said Boluarte, who was making her first trip abroad since Peru was gripped by protests after she took power last December.

After hours of talks, a joint Acto communique, called **the Belém Declaration**, was published, calling for increased police and intelligence collaboration to fight illegal activities and environmental crime as well as human rights violations against Indigenous people and activists. It said a law enforcement centre would be opened in the Brazilian city of Manaus to promote cooperation among regional police forces.

The 113-point text also urged greater efforts to slash deforestation and promote sustainable development in the region. However, the document fell short of many expectations for failing to include a common goal of zero deforestation by 2030.

Marcio Astrini, the executive secretary of the Climate Observatory group, said he had mixed feelings about a declaration that was weaker than many environmentalists had hoped for.

“It’s a first step. It was important for [these leaders] to come together but there isn’t much concrete in there. It’s a list of very generic promises. It was lacking something more forceful,” Astrini said.

“We’re living in a world which is melting. We are breaking temperature records all the time. How can it be that in a 22-page declaration the presidents of eight Amazon countries can’t clearly state that deforestation needs to stop?”

The challenges facing the group’s members are almost as immense as the Amazon itself, which is home to an estimated 400bn trees belonging to 16,000 different species, more than 1,300 species of birds, tens of thousands of species of plant, and 20% of the world’s freshwater resources. It is also estimated to contain more than 120bn tonnes of carbon, making it a vital carbon sink.

But over the past half-century, the advance of cattle ranching, logging, mining, soy farming and oil exploration has devastated huge swathes of the region, pushing it towards what scientists fear could be an irreversible tipping point that would cause the forest to die off.

According to the MapBiomas scientific network, about 17% of the rainforest region – about 750,000 sq km (an area almost as large as Turkey) – had been destroyed by 2021.

Transnational mafia groups have expanded their footprint, with one senior Brazilian police chief recently warning “**criminal insurgents**” could **commandeer parts of the Amazon** with dire consequences for the rainforest and its inhabitants.

Speaking on Tuesday, Lula vowed to strike back against crime syndicates, opening 39 new police bases across the region.

“My predecessor opened the doors to environmental crime and organised crime,” he said. “Criminal networks are organising across borders bringing increased insecurity to the whole region. We are determined to turn the situation around.”

However, the Brazilian president insisted international support would be key to efforts to protect the Amazon, and urged regional governments to unite before this year's Cop28 summit in Dubai "so that rich countries which have already destroyed their forests take responsibility for funding our development".

Excitement over Lula's Amazon blueprint is accompanied with anxiety that Brazil's conservative-dominated congress might prevent the president from enacting his ambitious environmental agenda, which has already **achieved a 42.5% drop in deforestation**.

"We know we have so many enemies in congress who don't like us," said Alessandra Korap, a leader of the Munduruku people.

Korap urged Lula to oppose oil exploration in the Amazon and take a stand against draft legislation that would invalidate Indigenous claims to lands so they could not prove they occupied them when Brazil's 1988 constitution was enacted. "This would mean the death of our peoples," Korap said.

Amazon leaders call for rich countries' support to save rainforest

Eight presidents including Brazil leader Lula fail to commit to end deforestation by 2030

Patrick Greenfield, Tom Phillips *and agencies*

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Lula, the president of Brazil, speaks to his minister of Indigenous peoples, Sonia Guajajara, at the Amazon summit. Photograph: Ricardo Stuckert/Brazilian presidency/AFP/Getty

Amazon leaders have called on rich countries to help them develop a Marshall-style plan to protect the world's largest rainforest – but stopped short of committing to zero deforestation across the biome by 2030 amid divisions over oil extraction.

In a joint declaration at the end of a two-day summit in the Brazilian city of Belém on Wednesday, the eight South American countries that are home to the **Amazon rainforest** said ensuring its survival could not be solely up to them, as resources from the forest were consumed globally.

Members of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organization did not agree a shared commitment to end deforestation this decade, which had been hoped for in the run-up to the regional meeting.

The countries were unable to agree a united position on the role of extractive industries in the region such as beef, oil and mining, which are the primary drivers of its destruction.

But they signalled they would work together to ensure the forest's survival through sustainable economic development, appealing for extra resources from industrialised countries to do so before Cop28. **Brazil and Colombia have reported falling deforestation rates under** new leadership in the past 12 months.

In the declaration, Amazon leaders called for debt relief in exchange for climate action, agreed to strengthen regional law enforcement cooperation to crack down on human rights violations, illegal mining and pollution, and urged industrialised countries to comply with obligations to provide financial support to developing countries.

The Brazilian president, **Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva**, told delegates at the closing of the summit: “The forest unites us. It is time to look at the heart of our continent and consolidate, once and for all, our Amazon identity.

“The Amazon is our passport to a new relationship with the world, a more symmetric relationship, in which our resources are not exploited to benefit few, but rather valued and put in the service of everyone.”

Loss of tree cover in South America, 2002 to 2022

■ Tree cover loss, 2002-2022 ■ Extent of primary forest at end of 2001



Guardian graphic. Source: Global Forest Watch/University of Maryland

The Colombian president, Gustavo Petro, has called for an end to the search for fossil fuels in the Amazon, which are the primary driver of global heating, but Brazil, Venezuela and other oil producers did not agree.

Lula has so far not taken a definitive stance on oil as Brazil's state-run Petrobras seeks permission to explore for oil near the mouth of the Amazon River. Guyana is on track to become a big oil producer in the coming years.

“A jungle that extracts oil – is it possible to maintain a political line at that level? Bet on death and destroying life?” Petro said at the meeting, discussing ways to help reforest pasture and plantations that have been previously cleared.

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The Bolivian president, Luis Arce, who has not backed a global agreement to end deforestation this decade and had the third highest amount of forest loss in 2022, said the Amazon had been the victim of capitalism.

He reflected on runaway expansion of agricultural borders and natural resource exploitation, noting that industrialised countries were responsible for most historical greenhouse gas emissions.

Arce said: “The fact that the Amazon is such an important territory does not imply that all of the responsibilities, consequences and effects of the climate crisis should fall to us, to our towns and to our economies.”

Brazil has made other agreements on protecting rainforests, signing a cooperation agreement with the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Indonesia for **biodiversity and climate UN Cops in a so-called Opec for rainforests**.