

Brazil targets illegal logging in major Amazon raids

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Agents of the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA) inspect logs seized from the Amazon rainforest during an operation to combat deforestation, at a sawmill in Nova California, Rondonia State, Brazil February 8, 2025. REUTERS/Ueslei Marcelino

PORTO VELHO, Brazil, Feb 17 - Brazilian environmental agents seized the equivalent of more than 5,000 truckloads of timber in an

operation targeting one of the most heavily logged regions of the Amazon rainforest in recent weeks, officials told Reuters.

The raids kicked off a year-long project called Operation Maravalha, named after a type of sawdust, in the states of Amazonas, Para and Rondonia. The government expects Maravalha to be the largest operation of its kind in over five years.

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Environmental protection agency Ibama, which led the operation, closed nearly a dozen sawmills and levied fines totaling 15.5 million reais (\$2.7 million) during a two-week raid.

The operation's goal is to curb illegal logging in protected areas and Indigenous lands with some of the country's highest deforestation rates, said Jair Schmitt, head of environmental protection at Ibama.

Investigators are also auditing timber projects in private lands suspected of defrauding government documentation to hide the real origin of native timber obtained illegally, Schmitt added.

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After the raids, Ibama plans to suspend some of the timber projects that were illegally used to launder timber taken from protected areas, Schmitt said.

"The idea behind this operation is for us to contain the extraction of illegal timber in the Amazon, which is the first step to deforestation," said Schmitt, as he stood near a pile of illegal timber his team seized in a rural part of Rondonia's capital, Porto Velho.

After valuable timber is extracted, Schmitt said, the rest of the forest is often razed to make way for cattle pasture. Profits made from the sale of timber are often used to fund the expensive process of converting the lush forest into pastures.

While roughly 90% of the timber illegally harvested in Brazil's Amazon rainforest is sold locally, some still reaches the United States and Europe, Schmitt said.

Investigators in the raid in Porto Velho found wood from several Amazon species considered valuable in global markets, such as the ipe, which is also endangered. The timber seized by Ibama will be donated to government agencies and projects.

Under President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, who vowed to protect the Amazon during his 2022 campaign, deforestation in the Brazilian rainforest fell to its lowest level in almost a decade last year.

Still, conservationists warn that illegal logging and fires are still damaging the forest in ways government deforestation data doesn't fully capture.

