

## Amazon destruction gathers pace

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Clearance of the Amazon forest in Brazil accelerated for the first time in four years, the Brazilian government has reported, as high commodity prices tempted farmers and ranchers to cut down more trees.

Satellite images showed nearly 12,000 sq km - an area nearly the size of the US state of Connecticut - were chopped down in the 12 months through to July, Brazil's National Institute for Space Research said. That is up from 11,224 sq km last year but down from a peak of 27,379 sq km in 2004.

"Today's figures are unacceptable but the long-term trend remains positive and they show that it is possible to do something about deforestation," said Paulo Moutinho, coordinator at the National Institute for Amazon Research.

For his part, Brazil's Environment Minister Carlos Minc, speaking at a news conference in the capital Brasilia, said he was dissatisfied with the figure but insisted it would have been much worse without government policies aimed at tackling illegal logging. "Many had expected an increase of 30-40% and we managed to stabilise it," he said.

Increased policing

The government this year increased policing, impounded farm products from illegally cleared land and cut financing for unregistered properties, stepping up its efforts after figures showed a spike in deforestation late last year. "When you confiscate soy and beef it hurts them in the pocket," Minc said.

But President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's commitment to preserving the environment has been called into question after Minc's predecessor Marina Silva, known as an Amazon defender, resigned in May citing difficulty in pushing through her agenda.

Critics say the environmental protection agency, IBAMA, is understaffed and underfunded to face thousands of often heavily armed loggers and ranchers in the world's largest rainforest.

Last week a crowd in Paragominas, a town that depends heavily on logging, ransacked IBAMA offices, torched its garage and used a tractor to break down the entrance of the hotel where its agents stayed. Twelve trucks loaded with confiscated wood were stolen.

With commodity prices having been near record highs for most of the year, increasing farmers' incentives to clear forest, analysts say that the government must do more to change the economics of deforestation to make a real difference. "We need to make it more expensive to cut a tree than to preserve it," said Moutinho.

He proposes that Brazil's local authorities and states be rewarded with tax breaks if they meet deforestation limits through cutting back on logging and promoting

sustainable industries, from fruit-picking to tourism.