Officials fighting uphill battle trying to end Amazon logging
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Locals complain once logging stops there are no jobs for them. Photo / AP
Climate Change

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TAILANDIA - Deep in the heart of the Amazon, the loggers are back. Last week, as darkness and a blizzard of insects descended on the remote town of Tailandia, hundreds of evangelicals crowded into a Pentecostal church on its main thoroughfare.

Outside, battered Mercedes lorries rattled through the shadows, packed with thick tree trunks and kicking red dust up into the evening air. Inside, the congregation took to its feet and gave thanks for the return of a modest prosperity.

Exactly one year ago, in February 2008, Tailandia became the first Amazonian town to be targeted as part of Operation Arc of Fire - an unprecedented Government clampdown on illegal logging launched after satellite images indicated an alarming rise in deforestation. Troops swept into this notorious logging outpost, closing down the sawmills and facing down the local people.

Hundreds of heavily armed police agents took to the streets alongside environmental agents who fined sawmill owners. The idea, officials said, was to "send a message" to illegal loggers: the illicit destruction of the world's largest tropical rainforest would no longer be tolerated.

Twelve months on, the clampdown is a distant memory. "The city is growing, the commerce is growing," said Wilson Pereira, the Pentecostal pastor. "The sawmills have started up again [and] the people have gone back to work."

The consequences of the logging are well known. Environmentalists estimate that nearly 20 per cent of the Brazilian Amazon has been destroyed. Deforestation accounts for almost 20 per cent of the world's annual carbon emissions and

activists say that Brazil is responsible for about 40 per cent of that.

But when an industry supplies a region's economic lifeblood, shutting it down is not so simple. Last year's crackdown triggered chaos in the dusty frontier town of almost 65,000 residents where officials claim that between 70 per cent and 95 per cent of local residents are dependent on logging income.

More than 2000 protesters took to Tailandia's streets, blocking its main avenue with burning tyres and tree trunks. Environmental agents fled, returning only when heavily armed police had quelled the rioters with a hail of rubber bullets and tear gas. "Not even in the slums of Rio and Sao Paulo do they have operations that size," Edson Azevedo, the town's deputy mayor, said. "Not even the narco-traffickers have faced what happened here in Tailandia."

In a town that claims Brazil's fifth highest murder rate, the prospect of active social strife was real.

Many locals are still bitter. "There is nothing here for me, nothing," said Fernando da Conceicao, 57, a former sawmill worker from north-eastern Brazil, who has been reduced to begging in the town's bars and restaurants since losing his job following Operation Arc of Fire.

But a year on things are slowly returning to normal. The federal police and the national security force have gone and the loggers are starting up again, breathing at least some of the old life back into the area's economy.

Azevedo claimed that many loggers had headed to other, more remote parts of the Amazon. But, off the record, locals say most of them are simply reopening their operations in Tailandia.

The signs that illegal logging has returned are everywhere. Tractors can be seen dragging newly felled trees around sawmills, and when night falls the growl of lorry engines fills the air, as lumber and loads of charcoal are transported through town on their way to mills or river barges farther north.

Government officials concede that many illegal charcoal factories and some sawmills have reopened. Walmir Ortega, Environment Secretary in the Amazonian state of Para, where Tailandia is located, said there had been "a considerable improvement" in the region but admitted "many of the aspects that we confronted last year are still there".

"We are a long way from reaching a final solution [to rainforest destruction]," said Ortega, whose house was put under police protection after the raid in Tailandia. "We are talking about a state that you could fit several United Kingdoms inside. It is a gigantic territory, with huge access problems. There are regions that are 1000, 1500km away from [state capital] Belem."

In an interview with this reporter, Brazil's Environment Minister, Carlos Minc, insisted operations such as Arc of Fire were bearing fruit. In the eight months since he took office, Minc said, deforestation had fallen by 40 per cent as a result of

constant operations and other Government measures intended to encourage "sustainable" forestry projects.

But Minc, who has accompanied 14 anti-deforestation operations, admitted that police operations alone would not solve the problem. "We need more people, more operations and more economic alternatives," he said. "I need at least another 1000 federal police agents in the Amazon, at least another 1500 environmental inspectors."

There are only 107 environmental agents in Para, Brazil's second largest state, which covers more than 1.2 million square kilometres. "I have 300 environmental agents to take care of the Amazon. The Amazon is the size of Europe. This really is ridiculous."

According to Minc, the Brazilian Government is studying new measures aimed at reducing deforestation by 70 per cent by 2017.

On the streets of Tailandia, environmental objectives come a poor second to the desire to earn a decent living.

"I went to the sawmill I used to work at today and he [the boss] said there was no work. [The environmental agency] Ibama closed him down," said Conceicao, the former sawmill worker. The only reason he would not leave Tailandia was because his former boss, like others in the region, plans to reopen in coming weeks now that the Government forces are fighting deforestation elsewhere.

- OBSERVER