

Amazon fires: What's the latest in Brazil?

By Roland Hughes
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In 2018, the BBC visited Brazil's highly biodiverse Cerrado, which is being cleared for soy production

Dark clouds of smoke smothered cities in Brazil as parts of the Amazon burned at a rate not seen in years, and the world responded with outrage.

For a few weeks in August, the world's eyes were fixed on Brazil and its government's response. But what is the latest with the fires now, almost two months on? And why might the problem be worse than it first appeared?

There are still Amazon fires - though not as many

When the burning of the Amazon was at its peak in August, there were thousands of individual fires, almost three times as many that month - 30,901 - compared with the same period last year.

What caused this? Forest fires do happen in the Amazon during the dry season between July and October. They can be caused by naturally occurring events, like lightning strikes, but this year most are thought to have been started by farmers and loggers clearing land for crops or grazing.

This matters because the Amazon is the largest rainforest in the world and a vital carbon store that slows down the pace of global warming.

The world reacted with fury to the fires - there were protests in dozens of cities, threats of financial penalties, and broad condemnation of **Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro's environmental policies.**



"It's extremely upsetting... to see this kind of devastation" - the BBC's Will Grant flew over the Amazon fires in August

In late August, Mr Bolsonaro deployed the army to the Amazon and ordered a 60-day ban on setting fires to clear land there. The measures had an effect - the number of fires in the Amazon dropped by a third between August and September. The pace has slowed even more this month, and is likely to do so even more now that annual rains have started.

Fires in Brazil's Amazon

*2019 data up to 7 October

Source: INPE

There are signs, though, that the situation is worse than it appears. This is because the burning of the rainforest isn't the biggest problem - deforestation is.

Traditionally, Amazon rainforest is felled, left to dry and then set on fire. By the time the moratorium came in, vast deforestation had already taken place. The only thing the ban prevented was more burning.

"They reduced the level of burning, but not the level of deforestation," says Ane Alencar, the science director of the non-profit Amazon Environmental Research Institute (Ipam). "By the end of August, most of the deforestation in the current year had already happened." Statistics gathered by Inpe, Brazil's satellite agency, suggest that **at least 7,747 sq km of Brazilian Amazon rainforest have already been cleared so far this year.**

Ane Alencar believes the true figure is likely to be at least 30% higher, making it the worst year since 2008 for Amazon deforestation in Brazil. A lot of the wood has yet to be burned, she believes, because of the moratorium and the fact annual rains are now starting.

"There are a lot of areas that were deforested but were not burned, but they might be burned next year instead," Ms Alencar says.

The problem has moved from the Amazon

While fires have eased in the Brazilian Amazon, it's been a different story in another fragile region to the south - the Cerrado savannah. The WWF calls it "one of the most endangered ecosystems on the planet" but there were more fires there than in the Amazon last month.



Swathes of the Cerrado have been converted for soy bean farming

The Cerrado is one of the most biodiverse areas in the world - about 40% of the animal and plant species there can't be found anywhere else on the planet, and it is populated by jaguars, anteaters and macaws. But, according to the Amazon Environmental Research Institute (Ipam) about half the forests, wetlands, woods and grasslands there have already been lost - **much of it to make way for soy bean farming.**

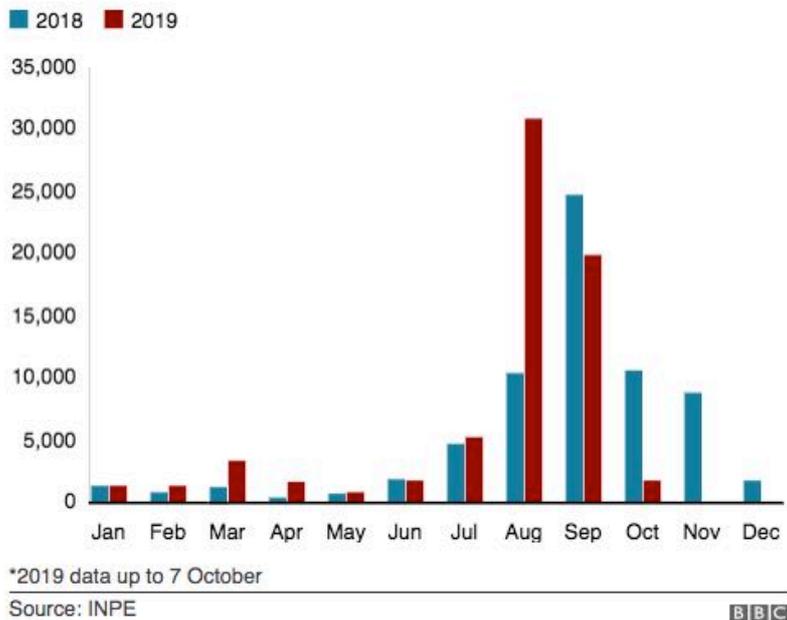
Although the Brazilian Amazon is under threat, the vast majority of it remains intact. The Cerrado is about half the size of the Brazilian Amazon, and land is being lost at a much more rapid rate.



The savannah's role as a carbon store, and thus in managing the world's climate, is crucial. Ipam estimates **that the number of trees lost there in 2016 and 2017 was the equivalent of 440 million more tons of CO₂ going into the atmosphere - put simply, that's more than the total CO₂ emissions of the UK in one year.**

The Cerrado was not subject to the same ban on fires enforced on the Brazilian Amazon in late August. And so, between August and September, the number of fires in the savannah increased by 78% to 22,989.

Fires in Brazil's Amazon



"When society was looking at the Amazon, they were thinking [in the Cerrado], it's OK, we can do whatever we want here," Ane Alencar says.

There have been almost 1,800 fires in the Cerrado so far in October, but the worst is likely to have passed. By the end of the month, the heavy annual rains will hit the region.

Campaigners say more could be done

Brazil's environment minister told the BBC the government was doing an "excellent" job in protecting the Amazon, but campaigners say it could be doing more than just stopping fires in one region for 60 days.

"The fires in the Amazon might have slowed after Brazil's firefighting response, but this short-term response is not enough," says Christian Poirier, programme director of US-based non-profit group Amazon Watch.



WATCH: Brazil has done "excellent job" on the Amazon

"We need a real commitment from Bolsonaro's government to protect Brazil's forests and their indigenous and traditional communities, who are the true guardians of the Amazon.

"Bolsonaro has promised 'zero tolerance' for explosive deforestation and subsequent widespread arson; however, his policies and rhetoric have actually encouraged such crimes."

There are plenty of fires outside of Brazil



Drone footage shows some of the damage done to Bolivia's Amazon

Although Brazil's fires have grabbed most of the headlines, it's far from the only South American nation to have suffered fires - or to face controversy over how they started.

Paraguay lost many hectares of protected forest from the Pantanal, the world's largest tropical wetlands, endangering its biodiversity. WWF Paraguay say it's a human-made problem, as farmers burn grasslands to improve the quality of cattle pastures, triggering forest fires.

Data from Brazil's satellite agency shows more than 18,200 fires in Paraguay in 2019, up 16% from this time last year.



Bolivians embark on long protest march over fires

In Bolivia, fires - some set deliberately - have destroyed more than four million hectares since May, but heavy rain may now be easing the situation. On Tuesday officials said wildfires in the east had been quelled, and **footage showed firefighters in badly-hit Chiquitanía jumping for joy.**

Bolivia's fires had triggered mass protests against President Evo Morales, who recently passed a decree allowing farmers to clear four times more land for agriculture - a process completed by burning.

Additional reporting by Rebecca Seales

Bolivian Amazon fires: relief as rains douse two-month inferno

Heavy rains have helped military contain blazes that have burnt more than 4m hectares of land

Reuters

Tue 8 Oct 2019 01:50 BST



Forest fires have raged in the Bolivian Amazon for two months, doing damage to huge swathes of land, including in Otuquis National Park, in the Pantanal ecoregion of Bolivia. Photograph: Aizar Raldes/AFP/Getty Images

Heavy rains over recent days in the Bolivian Amazon have helped put out forest fires that have raged for two months across the land-locked South American nation, charring more than 4m hectares of land, local authorities said on Monday.

The storms helped Bolivia's military contain blazes in the region of Chiquitania, home to large areas of dry forests and indigenous communities that have lived in them for centuries.

"Satellite images no longer detect burning or reactivated fires," said Cinthia Asin, an official for environmental issues for the provincial government of Santa Cruz, a farming province in eastern **Bolivia** hard-hit by the fires.

Indigenous groups have marched through the province, while in the capital city on Friday hundreds of thousands of people protested against what they said had been a slow response to the fires by the national government.



A marine works to put out a fire in the Chiquitania Forest in Santa Rosa de Tucabaca, on the outskirts of Robore, Bolivia in August. Photograph: Juan Karita/AP

The national weather service also told Reuters that in Chiquitania no fires were registered on Monday. But it warned that strong sun and high temperatures were expected to return to the region over coming days, raising the risk of fires ahead.

Armed forces commander Williams Kaliman said there was no immediate plan to withdraw about 5,000 troops that had been sent to battle the worst fires Bolivia has had over the last two decades. **Critics say deforestation, caused by the government's policy of increasing farming, is to blame for the disaster.**

The government says it has spent more than \$20 million in its effort to douse the flames. Complaints over the government's handling of the crisis have dented the popularity of Bolivia's leftist president, Evo Morales.

In neighbouring Brazil, **the number of fires in the Amazon rainforest receded in September** amid improved weather conditions and containment efforts by the country's military.

