

# Bolsonaro says reports of Amazon fires are a 'lie.' Evidence says otherwise

By Rodrigo Pedroso and Marcia Reverdosa, CNN

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Aerial view of a burning area of Amazon rainforest reserve, south of Novo Progresso in Para state, on August 16, 2020.

**Sao Paulo (CNN)** In aerial photos, smoke billows over trees and rivers in the Amazon and lines of glowing red embers snake across the ground -- but President Jair Bolsonaro says the reports of fires in the vast rainforest are false.

"This story that the Amazon is on fire is a lie," he said during the August 10 second Presidential Summit of the Leticia Pact for the Preservation of the Amazon. "And we must combat this with real numbers."

But the real numbers reported by [Brazil's National Institute for Space Research](#) (INPE) are damning: Since Bolsonaro took office in January 2019, deforestation has surged nearly 30%, which is mostly caused by illegal logging and fires set by loggers and developers.

- [In July alone](#), INPE documented 6,803 fires in the Amazon, up from 5,318 a year ago. And in the first two weeks of August -- the peak time for fires -- the agency reported more than 15,000 fire spots in the Amazon, a worrying number but down 17% versus the same period last year

And the presence of fires has recently been documented by environmental [NGO Greenpeace](#), which released photos from an Aug 16 flyover of southern Amazonas and in Rondônia -- including protected areas which cannot legally be exploited for commercial purposes, showing flames and smoke.

Yet Bolsonaro's government continues to reject concerns that fires in the area are out of control -- on Wednesday, Vice President Hamilton Mourao insisted that the protected part of the forest "is not burning," and lashed out at US actor Leonardo diCaprio for posting about the issue on social media.

"I would like to invite our most recent critic, actor Leonardo DiCaprio, to go with me here to São Gabriel da Cachoeira to do an eight-hour march through the jungle between São Gabriel airport and the Cucuí road.

There he will better understand how things work in this immense region," said Mourao, during a conference promoted by the Brazilian industry association (CNI).

## Clearing the Amazon

The Amazon is the world's largest rainforest and an indispensable resource in the battle against global warming. When the rainforest is

healthy, its trees and plants pull billions of tons of heat-trapping carbon dioxide from the atmosphere each year, and it is one of the planet's best defenses against climate change.

Fires are often lit in the Amazon to clear vegetation from parts of the forest that have already been cut down -- all in preparation for illegal pasture planting and cattle raising. Environmentalists have criticized Bolsonaro's outspoken support for logging and development in the Amazon as signaling encouragement for illicit land-clearing operations. Bolsonaro has faced pressure to take action to preserve the Amazon. Last summer's fires were a huge [black eye](#) for the country and in June, a group of 34 international investors threatened to divest from Brazilian companies unless steps were taken to curb the destruction.

His government has taken some steps to do so. In mid-July, Bolsonaro signed a decree banning fires for 120 days. Brazil's Defense Ministry also launched Green Brazil Operation 2, a military mission aimed at curbing destructive fires.

While fires increased in the Amazon in July, Bolsonaro pointed out in his August 10 address that total deforestation -- which includes fires along with other methods of land-clearing -- fell 28%, compared to last year's record-breaking deforestation in the same month.

Nevertheless, the overall trend suggests bad news for the Amazon's flora and fauna, with INPE data showing that overall deforestation in the Amazon has risen sharply in the first half of 2020.

For Greenpeace, the presence of fires proves Bolsonaro's administration is not doing enough to enforce environmental protections "on paper."

"In 2020, despite the prohibition of the use of fire and with the armed forces in the field since mid-May, the fires are still uncontrolled in the Amazon, proving once again the inefficiency of the government," said

Cristiane Mazzetti, spokesperson for the Greenpeace Amazon campaign.

"The figures show that the strategy adopted by the federal government is inefficient to contain the destruction of the most biodiverse forest on the planet," Mazzetti said. "Prohibiting fires on paper does not work without efficient command and control operations by the designated agencies."

The Leticia Pact was formed last September by seven of the nine countries that share the Amazon region -- Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, Brazil, Guyana and Suriname. It requires collaboration tackling the causes of deforestation, the creation of forest restoration initiatives, the sustainable use of natural resources, actions to strengthen women and indigenous peoples, and the creation of educational campaigns on the importance of that region.

- Bolsonaro told last week's gathering that Brazil had been unfairly criticized. "Our policy is zero-tolerance. Not only for the common crime but also for the environmental issue. Fighting illicit activities is essential for the preservation of our Amazon rainforest."

But then he went on to urge the kind of activity in the Amazon that conservationists say ultimately signals tolerance for illegal deforestation and burning. "But that is not all. We must also develop sustainable development in the region," he said.

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# Brazil's Bolsonaro calls surging Amazon fires a 'lie'

Jake Spring, Maria Carolina Marcello  
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BRASILIA (Reuters) - Brazil's President Jair Bolsonaro on Tuesday angrily denied the existence of fires in the Amazon rainforest, calling it a "lie," despite data produced by his own government showing

that thousands of fires are surging across the region.

Bolsonaro last year similarly denied a spike in fires that provoked a global outcry, with the right-wing populist trading barbs with French President Emmanuel Macron and other world leaders.

The president's comments on Tuesday come even as Reuters witnesses in the remote Amazon town of Apui observed smoke blanketing the horizon in all directions during the day and large fires setting the sky aglow at night.

Fires in Brazil's Amazon for the month of August hit a nine-year high in 2019 and this month so far looks even worse. More than 10,000 fires have been recorded in the first 10 days of August, up 17% from the same period a year ago, according to data

from the country's national space research agency Inpe.

But in a speech to other South American leaders on Tuesday, Bolsonaro challenged foreign representatives to fly over the Amazon saying that traveling by air from the far flung cities of Boa Vista to Manaus, you would not see a single flame.

“They won't find any spot of fire, nor a quarter of a hectare deforested,” the former army captain told a meeting of members of the Leticia Pact, an agreement between Amazon countries to protect the rainforest.

“This story that the Amazon is going up in flames is a lie and we must combat it with true numbers,” he said.

Bolsonaro interfered in Inpe after it released unfavorable data on Amazon

deforestation last year, firing the agency's head Ricardo Galvao who defended his agency's numbers that showed rising destruction.

In his speech, Bolsonaro argued that Brazil has shown itself capable of protecting the Amazon alone because the majority of the forest is still standing.

He said the Amazon is a wet forest that preserves itself and does not catch fire. The media and foreign governments are presenting a false narrative about the Amazon, he said.

Experts say that fires are not a natural phenomenon in the rainforest, but are usually man-made in order to clear deforested land for pasture.

Deforestation rose 34.5% in the 12-months through July, compared to the same period a year ago. Forest clearances did fall in July, the first decline in 15 months, a point emphasized by Bolsonaro.[nL1N2F913F]

Foreign pressure is mounting on Brazil to protect the world's largest rainforest, an ecosystem vital to preserving climate change because of the vast amount of carbon dioxide that it absorbs.

Slideshow (5 Images)

Global investors managing more than \$2 trillion have threatened to pull their investments out of Brazil's meatpackers, grains traders and government bonds if Bolsonaro's administration doesn't take action on Amazon destruction.

[nL1N2DV1BP]

Bolsonaro has dispatched the military to fight fires and deforestation since May, with the armed forces working with environmental agency Ibama to combat fires near Apui, according to Reuters witnesses.

Reporting by Maria Carolina Marcello and Jake Spring; Additional reporting by Ueslei Marcelino and Leonardo Benassatto in Apui, Brazil; editing by Richard Pullin

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