

Police raid office of Brazil NGO linked to brigade that helped battle Amazon fires

Raid and arrests of four volunteer firefighters were a politically-motivated attack, indigenous associations and campaigners say

Dom Phillips *in Rio de Janeiro*

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A fire burns in a section of the Amazon rain forest on 25 August in Porto Velho, Brazil. Photograph: Victor Moriyama/Getty Images

The headquarters of an award-winning Brazilian NGO which works with remote communities in the Amazon has been raided by police, who also arrested four volunteer firefighters and accused them of starting wildfires to raise international funding.

At dawn on Tuesday, heavily armed police raided the offices of the **Health and Happiness Project**, (known by its Portuguese initials as PSA) in Alter do Chão in the Amazon state of Pará, seizing computers and documents.

PSA has close links to the Alter do Chão **volunteer fire brigade**, which in September helped battle huge wildfires raging through protected areas in this

popular tourist region. The four arrested firefighters were members of the volunteer brigade, and one of them works for PSA.

The arrests came three months after Brazil's far-right president Jair Bolsonaro sought to **blame** a surge in Amazon fires on NGOs, without providing any evidence.

"It is a Kafkaesque situation, we were all taken by surprise without understanding why," said the Health and Happiness Project's coordinator Caetano Scannavino. "If [the firefighters] were really criminals they must be Hollywood actors because they tricked us."

The Alter do Chão fire brigade also denied the accusations. "We are sure that whatever the accusation, their innocence will be made clear," it said in a statement.

Local indigenous associations and campaigners said the raid and arrests were a politically-motivated attack on dedicated firefighters and a respected NGO.

"This is a very serious NGO whose work is recognised by the local population and internationally," said Felipe Milanez, a professor of humanities at the Federal University of Bahia.

"We know the serious work and honesty of our firefighters," said the Iwipuragã indigenous association.

José de Melo Jr, the detective leading the investigation, denied any political dimension and said he had evidence of arson.

"We observed in some images that the firefighters were responsible for starting these fires," he said. "They created a problem for them to solve and make money from."

Detective Melo Jr sent the Guardian a video he said firefighters had uploaded to **Youtube**. Apparently shot from a drone, it showed blazes burning in a stretch of forest before panning back to reveal a vehicle on a dirt road, but did not show anybody lighting any fires.

The Alter do Chão brigade was formed last year and has close links to the Health and Happiness Project, founded in 1987 by Caetano Scannavino's brother Eugênio, a doctor from São Paulo.

"They have paralysed our operations," said Eugênio Scannavino. "This is very

dangerous, it is a retaliation against the NGOs.”

The NGO’s activities include operating a hospital boat visiting remote riverside communities and helping indigenous communities develop sustainable tourism. It also runs an experimental agroforestry centre.

On Monday the Folha de S.Paulo **newspaper** reported that real estate interests were pressurising protected areas in Alter do Chão. In September federal prosecutors said they suspected one of the Alter do Chão fires had been started in an area **invaded** by a land grabber on the run from police after being handed a six-year, ten-month prison sentence.

But Detective Melo Jr said his operation has not examined any possible links between the fires and land speculation which locals say is rife on protected areas.

Topics

Brazil's president claims DiCaprio paid for Amazon fires

Jair Bolsonaro falsely accuses actor of funding deliberate destruction of rainforest

Tom Phillips *Latin America correspondent*

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Fires burn in Pará state, Brazil, in September. Jair Bolsonaro accused Leonardo DiCaprio of 'giving money for the Amazon to be torched'. Photograph: Nelson Almeida/AFP via Getty Images

Brazil's president has falsely accused the actor and environmentalist **Leonardo DiCaprio** of bankrolling the deliberate incineration of the Amazon rainforest.

Jair Bolsonaro – a populist nationalist who has vowed to drive environmental NGOs from Brazil – made the claim on Friday, **reportedly telling supporters**: “This Leonardo DiCaprio’s a cool guy, isn’t he? Giving money for the Amazon to be torched.”

The spurious accusation – for which Brazil’s president offered no proof – came 24 hours after Bolsonaro made a similarly unsubstantiated claim in **a Facebook live broadcast**.

“Leonardo DiCaprio, dammit, you’re collaborating with the burning of the Amazon,” Bolsonaro declared, accusing the actor of being part of an international “campaign against Brazil”.

Bolsonaro’s unsubstantiated allegations relate to the controversial **arrest on Tuesday of four volunteer firefighters** whom local police accused – also apparently without evidence – of setting fire to the forest in order to boost fundraising efforts for an international NGO.

The firefighters were released on Thursday amid widespread public outrage at their treatment and questions over the police investigation.

On Thursday Bolsonaro’s politician son Eduardo **claimed on Twitter** that DiCaprio had donated \$300,000 (£230,000) to “the NGO that set fire to the Amazon” and accused the conservation group

WWF of paying the NGO about £13,000 for photographs of the burning forest.

WWF's Brazil office rejected those claims. "WWF Brazil rejects the attacks on its partners and the lies involving its name, including a series of lie-based social media attacks such as the purchase of photographs linked to a donation from the actor Leonardo DiCaprio," **it said in a statement.**

In August – as **huge fires swept through the Amazon region** sparking an international crisis – **DiCaprio pledged \$5m** to help protect Brazil's rainforests.

Bolsonaro, who took office in January, has repeatedly expressed animosity towards environmental campaigners, NGOs and foreign leaders who have spoken out in defence of the Amazon and criticised his stance on the environment.

During a visit to the region in 2018 **Bolsonaro told the Guardian:** "This cowardly business of international NGOs like WWF and so many others from England sticking their noses into Brazil is going to end! This tomfoolery stops right here!"

Bolsonaro's attack on the Hollywood actor sparked ridicule and anger among opposition politicians and activists.

"How desperate," **tweeted Randolfe Rodrigues**, a senator from the Amazon state of Amapá. "Our negligent and incompetent president – responsible for an environmental dismantling unprecedented in our country – wants to blame DiCaprio but won't blame his own administration which is incapable of taking a single step without destroying something."

Ivan Valente, an opposition congressman, tweeted: "Bolsonaro's delirium knows no bounds. Accusing Leonardo DiCaprio of paying for the Amazon to be 'torched' is pathetic. But their deliberate lies are also revealing."

One Brazilian created **a webpage** to attribute blame for the South American country's various ills to a cast of Hollywood stars.

In it Tom Hanks was blamed for Brazil's high taxes, Penélope Cruz for unemployment, Daniel Radcliffe for impunity, Johnny Depp for deforestation and Kate Winslet for its education crisis.

Harrison Ford found himself charged with responsibility for **Brazil's Kafkaesque bureaucracy** while the government debt was the fault of Adam Sandler.

Topics

- **Jair Bolsonaro**

Leonardo DiCaprio responds after Brazil's President blames actor for Amazon forest fires

By Leah Asmelash, CNN

Updated 2100 GMT (0500 HKT) November 30, 2019

(CNN) Brazil's President blamed an unusual candidate this week as a cause of the [Amazon forest fires](#): actor and environmentalist [Leonardo DiCaprio](#).

President Jair Bolsonaro made the claim Thursday [on a webcast](#), arguing that nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) contributed to the forest fires that ravaged the [Amazon rainforest](#) earlier this year.

"The NGO people, what did they do? What's easier? Set fire to the bush," he said, providing no evidence to support the accusation.



Amazon deforestation rate hits highest level in over a decade

He continued, "Take photo, film, send it to an NGO, the NGO spreads it out, does a campaign against Brazil, gets in touch with Leonardo DiCaprio and Leonardo DiCaprio donates \$500,000 to this NGO. One part went to the people who were setting the fire, right?"

"Leonardo DiCaprio, you are assisting with the burning of the Amazon, that can't be," Bolsonaro said.

The Brazilian president doubled down on his claims Friday, talking to supporters outside the Presidential Palace in Brasília.

"Leonardo DiCaprio is a great guy, isn't he? Donating money to set the Amazon on fire," he said.

DiCaprio responded to the claims Saturday [on Instagram](#), refuting Bolsonaro's accusations while maintaining his support to the Brazilian people working to save the forest.

"The future of these irreplaceable ecosystems is at stake and I am proud to stand with the groups protecting them," he wrote. "While worthy of support, we did not fund the organizations targeted."

Two groups criticize Bolsonaro's accusations

[Global Wildlife Conservation](#) and [IUCN Species Survival Commission](#) are two of the largest environmental groups working in the Amazon. Both organizations released statements condemning Bolsonaro's accusations, though neither mentioned him by name.



Brazil's Bolsonaro says he 'loves' the Amazon. But his policies are designed to wreak havoc on it

The GWC said it remains concerned with the destruction of the Brazilian Amazon and reaffirmed its stance alongside those protecting it.

"The Amazon rainforest is in crisis. Brazil has historically made impressive progress towards protecting its unique ecosystems," GWC's statement read. "However, we are alarmed by recent events that seek to undermine this progress. In the past few days, false accusations have been made to undermine environmental defenders and distract the general public from policies that directly lead to environmental disasters like those across the Amazon earlier this year."

The IUCN similarly affirmed their support to those protecting the forest, while expressing concern toward the recent comments.

"As an umbrella organization committed to biodiversity conservation, we are concerned that there are increasing and targeted attacks on people and groups working to protect nature in the Amazon," its statement read. "Environmental defenders, whether in local communities, NGOs, or government agencies, should be afforded with the highest protection of the law in Brazil."

Bolsonaro has made similar claims before

This isn't the first time Bolsonaro has pointed fingers at NGOs for the Amazon forest fires. In August, when international criticism of the fires was at its peak, he accused environmental groups [of setting fires in the Amazon](#).

Those accusations came despite arguments from groups like Amnesty International, which attributed the fires to [Bolsonaro and his policies](#) that have led to increased land-clearing in the rainforest by loggers and ranchers.