

Bolivia: catastrophic wildfires devastate forest in echo of Brazil's Amazon crisis

Bolivia's president announced he would interrupt his re-election campaign for a week to help coordinate foreign aid efforts

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It's not just Brazil's Amazon that is on fire, Bolivia is facing its own disaster – video

As fires continue to rage in Brazil, nearly a million hectares (2.5m acres) of farmland and unique dry forest have been destroyed by weeks of blazes across the border in **Bolivia**, where the flames have now reached the country's Amazon region.

Initial estimates indicate 600 hectares of rainforest have been destroyed in the north-eastern region of Bení, where the fires now threaten indigenous populations.

“This is the biggest ever catastrophe for biodiversity in Bolivia,” said Fernando Vargas, an indigenous leader in the Isiboro Sécure Indigenous territory and national park, known as Tipnis by its Spanish acronym.

“But this is not a natural disaster but a manmade one,” he told the Guardian.



Evo Morales had previously rejected offers of international help to battle the fires. Photograph: David Mercado/Reuters

Bolivia's president, Evo Morales, had previously rejected offers of international help to battle the fires, but on Sunday he announced that he would interrupt his re-election campaign for a week to help coordinate foreign aid efforts.

“Any cooperation is welcome, whether it comes from international organisations, celebrities or from the presidents who offered to help,” Morales said in Cochabamba, where he had been **campaigning for a fourth term in office**.

The leading opposition candidate, Carlos Mesa, also suspended his election campaign in response to the national crisis.

Morales said he had been called by global leaders, including the presidents of Paraguay, Chile and Spain, as the G7 group of the world's

richest nations announced an aid package to fight Amazon fires.

Firefighters from Chile and Argentina as well as France, Spain and Russia were deployed to help fight the flames, according to local media reports.

However protesters and the political opposition say Morales' government needs to declare a state of emergency in the zone in order to allow foreign help in.

More than 2,700 fires had been registered by Bolivia's early warning fire detection agency on Monday, in a swath of flames across the country, from the Amazon north-east to the south-eastern Chaco biome.

"It's not a coincidence that less than a month ago the president declared a law which permitted slash and burn farming practices," said Adriana Rico, a Bolivian biologist.

Known in Bolivia as *chaqueo*, slash-and-burn is often practiced by migrant small farmers as a cheap and easy way to clear land, she added. Blazes have destroyed part of the Chiquitano forest, the Amazon and Bolivia's Pantanal region which it shares with Brazil and Paraguay.

"It's very sad for we indigenous peoples, we've lost our means of survival," said Adolfo Chávez, the former president of the Bolivian indigenous confederation CIDOB. He said Morales had turned his back on indigenous peoples by allowing the destruction of their habitat for the advance of agribusiness.



Volunteers work to put out a forest fire in Aguas Calientes, on the outskirts of Robore, Bolivia, 24 August 2019. Photograph: Juan Karita/AP

Last week, the pan-Amazon indigenous organisation COICA accused Morales, and his Brazilian counterpart, Jair Bolsonaro, of "gutting every environmental and social strategy to strengthen environmental governance of the Amazon".

It declared the two governments as not welcome in the Amazon and held them personally accountable for the "cultural and environmental genocide" in the world's largest wilderness.

"This month's devastating fires are the all-too-predictable consequence of the Morales government's decree authorising new land claims on cleared land", said Carwil Bjork-James, an anthropology professor at Vanderbilt University.

• This article was amended on 29 August 2019 to correct the conversion of 1m hectares into acres.

Bolivia Is Burning. Who Will Stop Its Fires?

President Evo Morales must issue a national disaster declaration to control the fires and avoid further loss of life.

By **Manuela Lavinás Picq**

Ms. Lavinás Picq is a specialist in indigenous politics and Latin America.



A firefighter from Argentina's army worked to control fires near Concepción, Bolivia, this month.
Edgard Garrido/Reuters

Fires have been [ravaging](#) the Bolivian lowlands for over a month. Nearly ten million acres have already burned, an area larger than Connecticut and New Jersey combined. Almost half the destruction lies in protected areas known for high biodiversity. It is a tragedy.

The Chiquitanía, a dry forest ecosystem between Amazonia and Gran Chaco in the province of Santa Cruz, is at the center of the crisis. The fires threaten the survival of the region's wildlife and indigenous people. The Ñembi Guasu Reserve, home to indigenous Ayoreo groups in voluntary isolation, is the most affected area. In the autonomous Guaraní community of Charagua Iyambae, thousands of acres of forest have been destroyed. Residents [are pleading](#) for help to stop the fires.

The destruction is incommensurable.

Evo Morales, Bolivia's first ever indigenous president, promised to defend Pachamama, or Mother Earth. Instead his government has promoted the interests of agribusiness. His government has enabled aggressive land grabs that have led to deforestation and indigenous dispossession, as President Jair Bolsonaro has done in Brazil. No wonder the Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin [accused](#) them both of environmental genocide.

Bolivia's fires are the bitter fruit of policies designed to benefit agribusiness. Mr. Morales has promoted the expansion of cattle ranching and biofuels in Santa Cruz since 2010. In April this year, Mr. Morales signed an agreement to increase beef exports to China, which have — [like Brazil's](#) — been growing in value and volume. Then in July, a decree legalized slash-and-burn fires to turn forests into pasture. Bolivians called Mr. Morales a "[murderer of nature.](#)"



Cattle in Charagua, Bolivia.
David Mercado/Reuters

The practice of burning to clear land, known as “chaqueo,” is common in Bolivia. But this time they grew out of control, fueled by higher temperatures and atmospheric drought, both caused by global warming. Firefighters extinguish fires only to see people start new ones. Even worse, Chiquitanía’s dry season extends until December, which means fires could rage for months.

The map of Bolivia’s fires overlaps with that of cattle and coca production. It is destruction, not development — for Bolivians, for the planet, and for business too. The irreparable loss of fauna and flora is beyond horrendous; indigenous territories have been decimated. The loss of biodiversity in Chiquitanía is also a loss for millions of people across Latin America whose lives depend on its water system.

Mr. Morales, who is running for a [controversial](#) fourth term, dismissed environmentalists’ concerns and marches in five cities as the “electoral nuisance of small groups.” One of his cabinet ministers, Juan Ramón Quintana, [ruled](#) out the declaration of a national disaster, claiming the fires were not uniform and did not affect enough people. Chiquitanos say the president intentionally let forests burn to ashes because the region holds little electoral value for him.

The first and most urgent step to control the fires is to declare a national disaster. Bolivia’s law establishes that the government should do so when events cause damage that the state is economically or technically unable to remedy. The government can then seek direct international assistance.

The fires raging across forests in Chiquitanía (and Amazonia) are intrinsic to a political economy of extraction that prevails in countries led by governments of both the right and the left across Latin America. Bolivia needs to address the root causes of the fires. Those responsible for setting the fires must be [held accountable](#). It is not just the destruction of Chiquitanía that is at stake. It is our planet, too.

Mr. Morales should reverse the policies that set off the fires, and move away from a destructive economy based on extractive industries. The government’s claim that there are not “enough deaths” is a brutal dismissal of indigenous lives by an indigenous president. It also goes against the principles on the rights of nature which Bolivia inscribed in its Constitution a decade ago.

Indigenous worldviews make no distinction between ecocide and genocide, because all beings are related — human, animal, plant, river. The indigenous Ayoreo people live in symbiosis with their ecosystem. They have nowhere else to go. Nor do the rest of us, for that matter. In a time of climate crisis, ecocide destroys vital

relationships between humans and nature.

Bolivia's government can learn much from indigenous initiatives. The Guaranís have led an admirable struggle for self-determination, and they already turned 68 percent of their autonomous territories into conservation areas. The most recent reserve, Ñembi Guasu, [was created](#) last May in an effort to protect indigenous ways of life and biodiversity for current and future generations. Now it is burning.

But President Morales can avoid further loss of life. He must declare a national disaster.

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'Murderer of nature': Evo Morales blamed as Bolivia battles devastating fires

Firefighters try to control a fire near Charagua, close to the border with Paraguay. Photograph: Aizar Raldes/AFP/Getty Images

Furious locals say president is culpable over unprecedented destruction of wildlife
by **Dan Collyns** in La Chiquitanía

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any Callaú can't remember how many nights he has been fighting the blaze which has engulfed huge swathes of forest. Nor can he stop thinking about his encounter with a fleeing jaguar a few nights before.

"It was running for its life," said the firefighter captain, peering out from under his yellow hard hat. "It was in a state of sheer terror."

The jaguar is a feared but **rarely sighted inhabitant of the Chiquitano dry forest**, the unique ecosystem sandwiched between the Amazon and the **Gran Chaco** that has borne the brunt of weeks of fires in eastern Bolivia. At least 1.2m hectares (3m acres) have been destroyed.

All the volunteer firefighters report seeing terrified and burned animals: **pacas**, wild pigs, armadillos, tapirs and many bird species. On one occasion a rattlesnake climbed up Callaú's leg before he kicked it away. "I caught my breath and realised it thought my leg was a tree," he said. "It was just trying to get away."

Thousands of fires swept through eastern Bolivia in August, to the fury of environmentalists and locals who accused the country's president, **Evo Morales**, of incentivising the blazes after he passed legislation in July that encourages slash-and-burn farming to create pasture and arable land. Morales, **who is running for a controversial fourth term of office**, has refused to rescind the decree. His government says high winds and dry conditions are to blame for the worst fires in living memory.



Armadillos and tapirs among wildlife caught in Bolivia's fires – video

Tears rolled freely down Andrés Manacá's begrimed face as he was embraced by colleagues and applauded by municipal workers in San Ignacio's town square. He had returned with other firefighter volunteers after eight days battling the flames.

"It's been a very hard experience because the fire nearly trapped me twice," he said, his voice breaking. "The first thing I thought of was my family, but thank God I'm here now."

Manacá and 14 other firefighters were dropped from helicopters into the forest more than 60 miles (100km) from the town, but soon found themselves fleeing flames that spread upward into the canopy so fast they created a **fire whirl**.

"It was violent, like lightning," he said. "It felt like we were working to defend nature." The unprecedented destruction of wildlife was also hard to stomach. Even following strict safety protocols, the men struggled psychologically, Manacá's fire chief, Luis Andrés Roca, said.

"The stench of burned flesh was unbearable," he said. "It's nesting season and when the trees caught light the parrots died in their nests. My companions and I would cry, we felt so powerless. It's the worst tragedy we've ever seen here."

Global opprobrium has been focused on Brazil's far-right president, **Jair Bolsonaro**, over the record number of fires raging in the Amazon, the world's largest tropical forest. Morales, Bolivia's leftwing leader, is now facing similar anger.



The **self-proclaimed defender of Pachamama, or Mother Earth**, is accused of employing the same populist policies as his Brazilian counterpart. The fires were mainly started by small farmers who used the recent legislation to open up new land to farming and cattle, his critics say.

In La Chiquitanía, a boundless region of savannah and forest, August is the month of high winds when farmers typically carry out *chaqueo*, the practice of burning to clear land. But never like this, said Hernán Ramos, 76, who has lived all his life in Las Taperas, a village on its eastern edge.

"There used to be just small fires, they were controlled, not like now," he said, pacing downcast over the blackened, ash-flecked earth. "These fires have surged in a way that there was no way to control."

The Chiquitano dry forest is the ecosystem which connects South America's two largest biomes, the Amazon and the Gran Chaco, a dense dry forest of thorn-covered trees and scrub that extends south into **Paraguay** and Brazil.

With tall, papery-barked, often leafless trees, copious underbrush and daytime temperatures that reach up to 45C, few places in the

world appear more flammable. It would only take a spark to set it ablaze.

On a three-day trip through the territory renowned for its Jesuit churches dating back to the 17th century, the Guardian saw a desolate panorama of scorched forests stretching for mile after mile.

Based on satellite images from Bolivia's early warning fire detection agency, environmental groups estimate the destruction has surpassed 2m hectares. About 16% of the damage is within protected areas and fires recently spread into Kaa-Iya, Bolivia's largest national park in the Gran Chaco.

Indigenous Chiquitano communities lost up to 98% of the forest they were working sustainably for timber and products such as copaiba oil, said María del Carmen Carreras of WWF [Bolivia](#).



Soldiers take a break from fighting fires in the Chiquitano dry forest. Photograph: Juan Karita/AP

Many locals blame migrant farmers moving from Bolivia's highlands to the tropical lowlands for spreading the fires because they don't know how to control them.

Standing across from a wooden colonial-era church painted with frescoes, San Ignacio de Velasco's mayor, Moises Salcés, held up his hand as he named the culprit of the disaster. "The [human] hand," he said, shaking his head wearily. "The cause is 99% indiscriminate slashing and burning."

"You can't just set the prairie alight. You have to pile up the wood and brush and cut it off with stones before," said Arnoldo "Chichi" Vaca, a wiry driver for tourists visiting the area's Jesuit churches. "These are outsiders who started these fires."

That perception has stoked existing racial tensions between *cambas* – Bolivians from the eastern lowlands – and migrant *collas* – mostly indigenous people from Morales's heartland in the western highlands, who are often looking to carve out a plot of land to farm.

Roly Aguilera, the secretary general of the eastern state of Santa Cruz, said the fires had spread because there were illegal settlements in the forest that "have been promoted politically by the central government".

When Morales visited the town of Concepción on Friday, he was assailed outside the town hall by orange-clad firefighters who demanded to know why he had not visited them to thank them. Insults were exchanged between his supporters and detractors who shouted: "Evo, murderer of nature." His office did not respond to a request for comment.

Morales has allowed in soldiers, planes and helicopters from mostly neighbouring countries to combat the fires, and last week he ordered that no agribusiness could be established on the burnt land. On Friday, he accused unspecified groups of paying people to start the fires.

Such tensions were laid bare when [protesters interrupted an event marking Bolivia's first beef export to China](#) last week in San Ignacio. Local media reported that as Morales sealed the first container of 96 tonnes of beef, demonstrators had chanted: "Behind every fallen tree there's a laughing cattle rancher."

There was no laughter on the frontlines of the battle, where volunteer firefighters worked by night to keep cooler and better see the embers. "Agua!" went up a shout as beams from volunteers' head-lamps illuminated the swirling smoke and ash hanging in the air.

Just half an hour outside La Concepción, the fire had consumed nearly everything. Twigs had become ash that could be brushed away like the tip of a cigarette left in an ashtray. A charred log pulsated white hot inside. The smell of wood smoke hang heavy and the ground was hot underfoot.

Dozens of volunteer firefighters who had come from cities across Bolivia complained they had received little support from the government.

“Reignition fire is a major problem, that’s why we have to be so thorough,” said Junior Tejada, a volunteer who had come with his brigade from Cochabamba. Like many others, he expressed rising anger at Morales’s slowness to act, and a growing sense of suspicion that the president shared some responsibility with the firestarters.

“What we’re doing to Bolivia and the Amazon is something that can’t be fixed even if we put out the fire now,” said Olivia Mansilla, an architect who took time off her job in Santa Cruz to volunteer. “What comes next will be a holocaust for nature.”