

# AP finds Brazil's plan to protect Amazon has opposite effect

By MAURICIO SAVARESE  
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[1 of 13](#)

Fire consumes land deforested by cattle farmers near Novo Progresso, Para state, Brazil, Sunday, Aug. 23, 2020. Under military command, Brazil's once-effective investigation and prosecution of illegal rainforest destruction by ranchers, farmers and miners has come to a virtual halt, even as this year's burning season is about to begin. (AP Photo/Andre Penner)

**NOVO PROGRESSO, Brazil (AP) —** In May, facing urgent international demands for action after a string of massive wildfires in the Amazon, Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro put the army in charge of protecting the rainforest.

Instead, The Associated Press has found, the operation dubbed as “Green Brazil 2” has had the opposite effect. Under military command, Brazil’s once-effective but recently declining investigation and prosecution of rainforest destruction by ranchers, farmers and miners has come to a virtual halt, even as this year’s burning season picks up.

The Brazilian army appears to be focusing on dozens of small road-and-bridge-building projects that allow exports to flow faster to ports and ease access to protected areas, opening the rainforest to further exploitation. In the meantime, there have been no major raids against illegal activity since Bolsonaro required military approval for them in May, according to public officials, reporting from the area and interviews with nine current and former members of Brazil’s environmental enforcement agency.

The AP also found that:

- The number of fines issued for environmental crimes has been cut by almost half since four years ago, especially under Bolsonaro.
- Two high-ranking officials from IBAMA, the environmental agency, say they have stopped using satellite maps to locate deforestation sites and fine their owners \_\_\_ a once-widely used technique. IBAMA officials spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the press.
- IBAMA is no longer penalizing the heads of big networks of illegal logging, mining and farming, according to two other officials. Meat packers who sell beef from deforested areas now operate freely, according to three IBAMA officials.

The order putting the military in charge of fighting deforestation was initially due to end in June, but it was recently extended by Bolsonaro until November despite widespread criticism that it is making the problem worse.

At stake is the fate of the forest itself, and hopes of limiting global warming. Experts say blazes and deforestation are pushing the world’s largest

rainforest toward a tipping point, after which it will cease to generate enough rainfall to sustain itself. About two-thirds of the forest would then begin an irreversible, decades-long decline into tropical savanna.

The Amazon has lost about 17% of its original area and, at the current pace, is expected to reach a tipping point in the next 15 to 30 years. As it decomposes, it will release hundreds of billions of tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere.

“From the occupation of the land to mining and the fires, it is all connected,” said Suely Vaz, who headed IBAMA between 2016 and 2019 and is now a specialist of the Climate Observatory, comprised of 50 non-governmental groups. “IBAMA should fight the whole network of deforestation. But it just doesn’t now.”

Bolsonaro’s office and IBAMA did not respond to requests for comment, but Bolsonaro declared in May that “our effort is great, enormous in fighting fires and deforestation.” He also called reports of the forest on fire “a lie.”

Brazil’s Defense Ministry defended its record, saying its deployment was “an operation of multiple agencies” involving 2,090 people a day, along with 89 vehicles and 19 ships.

“Those figures are rising by the day, as resources become available and operations are gradually intensified,” the ministry said.

It said the operation had led to the destruction of 253 machines involved in illegal logging as of Aug. 24 but did not specify what type of machines or say anything about other illegal activities like mining.

While the threat under Bolsonaro’s administration is the latest and most severe, efforts to preserve the Amazon have been struggling for years.

In the 2003-2011 administration of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, Brazil developed a multi-agency plan to slow Amazon deforestation that worked well, according to virtually all observers. That ended in 2012 when the government of his successor, Dilma Rousseff, pardoned illegal

deforestation prior to 2008, among other measures that emboldened violators. Many believe Bolsonaro will issue new pardons.

IBAMA once had more than 1,300 agents. That has dropped to about 600 since 2012, when the agency stopped hiring under Rousseff in an attempt to rein in spending.

The weakening of IBAMA accelerated after Rousseff was ousted in 2016 and replaced by right-wing Michel Temer. Observers on all sides say the change has been far more fast-moving and dramatic since Bolsonaro was elected in 2018, after a campaign that dismissed the threat of deforestation and pledged more development of the rainforest.

In the field, IBAMA has hundreds of inspectors who are supposed to conduct investigations, raid illegal sites, issue fines, destroy equipment and request arrests by local and federal police, along with a corps of temporary contract firefighters. But after the last major raid by IBAMA against illegal mining in April, the two inspectors in charge were fired by the environment ministry, allegedly for “political-ideological bias.”

A former Bolsonaro minister, Gen. Carlos Alberto dos Santos Cruz, told the AP that the army is best at supporting inspections in the Amazon, not leading them.

“In some places you cannot find any other institution, no police or IBAMA. There’s no structure and the military steps up,” he said. “The armed forces can help and they are helping. But inspections need to be done by those that are experts. And you have to work with local authorities, they are the ones who know who the criminals are.”

In 2016, the year Temer took office, there were almost 10,000 fines nationwide for environmental crimes, according to IBAMA’s website. In 2019, the first year of the Bolsonaro presidency, that shrank to 7,148. In the first six months of 2020, it stood at 3,721.

Defense Ministry numbers confirm that fines under operation Green Brazil 2 have continued at a lower rate, with 1,526 fines so far over about three months worth almost \$80 million.

“There is a reduction in fines because the president doesn’t like them, campaigns against them,” an IBAMA inspector based in the Amazon said. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak with the press by agency heads in the capital, Brasilia.

“Appointees to local IBAMA offices know that,” the official said. “If a given unit fines too much, they get a call from Brasilia.”

Last week, a group of five soldiers and five IBAMA firefighters drove into Nova Fronteira, a remote district of Pará state. Satellite images showed a big fire threatening a part of the forest on the edges of a private property.

Upon arrival, they saw a wooden gate closed with a single padlock. In the past, IBAMA staff would enter private properties in emergencies, as allowed by Brazilian law. That policy has changed with the army’s arrival.

“We can’t come in if the owner is not here,” said one soldier, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he wasn’t authorized to speak to the press.

A simple but effective change could be issuing fines to land owners through satellite imagery-aided investigation. An IBAMA specialist on data said 70% of deforestation in many areas can be located on aerial maps by Brazil’s space agency. That alone would allow IBAMA to find who owns the land and hold them accountable — which is not happening under the army, agency veterans said.

“We are not even trying now,” one high-ranking official said.

A former top IBAMA official said the army didn’t know how to lead investigations and could not legally issue fines, seize equipment or block construction. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he has received death threats from people involved in Amazon development.

“The army could use their technology to see where deforestation is growing, map it all and go after who is responsible,” he said. “But they spend their time either stopping IBAMA from doing that or working on construction projects.”

Another IBAMA agent who has organized hundreds of raids nationwide said the agency also is no longer investigating the heads of big networks of illegal logging, mining and farming. That type of high-end investigative work slowed down under Temer, with a few prominent exceptions, and stopped entirely under Bolsonaro, with new regional leaders of IBAMA offices tending to be former or active military or police officials seconded to civilian positions.

Those who support development applaud the army's foray into the Amazon.

Part-time farmer Antonio Silva has noticed the changes in the operations of Brazil's environmental enforcement agency — and he loves them. Silva struggled for years doing odd jobs in northern Brazil before he moved to the country's Amazon frontier and bought himself a 4-acre poultry farm outside the city of Novo Progresso, where he also works as a security guard.

As ranching and mining ate into the rainforest, the city grew from a few thousand to 25,000 residents, and the market for Silva's chicken and turkeys grew. There are now three electronics stores in town, instead of just one.

He said IBAMA used to aggressively patrol around his little farm, seeking out those who seized public lands and chopped and burned the rainforest for profit. A few years ago, they came in by helicopter, bringing police with machine guns. They arrested people and destroyed machinery.

"It was shocking," Silva said. "It is better now....they come twice a week to put out some fires, talk and that's it."

Every morning the city is covered in smoke from the previous days, which dissipates before fires start again in the afternoon. Novo Progresso has a dozen IBAMA inspectors and firefighters.

Residents say inspectors have barely left the office since the army arrived and firefighters are being called only in urgent situations or long after the blazes are out.

Last week, a group of IBAMA firefighters drove two hours to a fire started three days earlier. An area equivalent to eight soccer fields had already

been burned and some trees were still on fire, endangering a region of dense forest.

A man who did not identify himself blamed a neighbor for starting the blaze, but did not name the person or file a complaint. Agents saw a chainsaw on the ground and the man took it away, without answering whether he had a license for it, as required by Brazilian law. Records show no investigation was opened, no fines were issued.

The former top IBAMA official said the professional corps of inspectors used to have little fear of fining violators, confiscating their equipment or even destroying the whole operation. After the inspectors had their powers cut back, poorly paid and locally hired firefighters started giving them less information on wrongdoing.

“The firefighters would do it at their own risk,” the former official said. “And what for? After that gig ends six months later they have to live in the same place.”

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AP reporters Tatiana Pollastri, Marcelo Sousa and Ricardo Coletta contributed to this report from Sao Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia.