

# Amazon fires stir bitter dispute over who is to blame

August 22 2019, by Marcelo Silva De Sousa

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This Aug. 15, 2019 satellite image from Maxar Technologies shows closeup view of a fire southwest of Porto Velho Brazil. Brazil's National Institute for Space Research, a federal agency monitoring deforestation and wildfires, said the country has seen a record number of wildfires this year as of Tuesday, Aug. 20. (Satellite image ©2019 Maxar Technologies via AP)

As fires raged in the Amazon rainforest, the Brazilian government on Thursday denounced international critics who say President Jair Bolsonaro is not doing enough to curb massive deforestation.

The growing threat to what some call "the lungs of the planet" has ignited a bitter dispute about who is to blame during the tenure of a leader who described Brazil's rainforest protections as an obstacle to [economic development](#).

The president's defiance came as its own federal experts reported a record number of wildfires across the country this year, up 84 percent over the same period in 2018. Satellite images show smoke from the Amazon reaching across the Latin American continent to the Atlantic coast and Sao Paulo, Brazil's biggest city, according to the World Meteorological Organization.

On Thursday, Bolsonaro said there was a "very strong" indication that some non-governmental groups could be setting blazes in retaliation for losing state funds under his administration. He did not provide any evidence.

Bolsonaro, who won election last year, also accused [media organizations](#) of exploiting the fires to undermine his government.

"Most of the media wants Brazil to end up like Venezuela," he said, referring to political and economic turbulence in the neighboring South American country.



This Aug. 15, 2019 satellite image from Maxar Technologies shows overview of fires southwest of Porto Velho, Brazil. Brazil's National Institute for Space Research, a federal agency monitoring deforestation and wildfires, said the country has seen a record number of wildfires this year as of Tuesday, Aug. 20. (Satellite image ©2019 Maxar Technologies via AP)

London-based Amnesty International blamed the Brazilian government for the fires, which have escalated international concern over the vast rainforest that is a major absorber of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

The rights group this year documented illegal land invasions and arson attacks near indigenous territories in the Amazon, including Rondonia state, where many fires are raging, said Kumi Naidoo, Amnesty's secretary general.

"Instead of spreading outrageous lies or denying the scale of deforestation taking place, we urge the president to take immediate action to halt the progress of these fires," Naidoo said.

The WWF conservation group also challenged Bolsonaro's allegations about NGOs, saying they divert "the focus of attention from what really matters: the well-being of nature and the people of the Amazon."



This Aug. 15, 2019 satellite image from Maxar Technologies shows a fire and cleared land southwest of Porto Velho Brazil. Brazil's National Institute for Space Research, a federal agency monitoring deforestation and wildfires, said the country has seen a record number of wildfires this year as of Tuesday, Aug. 20. (Satellite image ©2019 Maxar Technologies via AP)

Brazil contains about 60 percent of the Amazon rainforest, whose degradation could have severe consequences for global climate and rainfall. Bolsonaro, who has said he wants to convert land for cattle pastures and soybean farms, won office after channeling outrage over the corruption scandals of the former government.

Citing Brazil's apparent lack of commitment to fighting deforestation,

Germany and Norway have decided to withhold more than \$60 million in funds earmarked for sustainability projects in Brazil's forests.



In this Aug. 20, 2019 drone photo released by the Corpo de Bombeiros de Mato Grosso, brush fires burn in Guaranta do Norte municipality, Mato Grosso state, Brazil. Brazil's National Institute for Space Research, a federal agency monitoring deforestation and wildfires, said the country has seen a record number of wildfires this year. (Corpo de Bombeiros de Mato Grosso via AP)

Filipe Martins, an adviser to Bolsonaro, said on Twitter that the Brazilian government is committed to fighting illegal deforestation and that many other countries are causing environmental damage.

The Amazon will be saved by Brazil and not "the empty, hysterical and misleading rhetoric of the mainstream media, transnational bureaucrats

and NGOs," Martins said.

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