

Respiratory ailments rise in Brazil as Amazon fires rage

August 28 2019, by Luis Andres Henao



Land smolders during a forest fire in Altamira in Brazil's Amazon, Monday, Aug. 26, 2019. The fire is very close to Kayapo indigenous land located on the Bau indigenous reserve. (AP Photo/Leo Correa)

Lingering smoke in the Amazon caused concern Tuesday among

Brazilians who say that respiratory problems—particularly among children and the elderly—have increased as fires in the region rage.

"The kids are affected the most. They're coughing a lot," said Elane Diaz, a nurse in the Rondonia state capital of Porto Velho, as she waited for a doctor's appointment at the city's 9 of July hospital with her 5-year-old-son Eduardo. "They have problems breathing. I'm concerned because it affects their health."

The number of people treated for respiratory issues increased sharply in recent days at the local Cosme e Damia Children's hospital.

"This period has been very tough. The dry weather and the smoke causes many problems on children, such as pneumonia, coughing and secretion," Daniel Pires, a pediatrician and the hospital's adjunct-director told the Folha de S. Paulo newspaper. "From Aug. 1 to Aug. 10, the median (number) of cases was about 120 to 130 children with [respiratory problems](#). From Aug. 11 to (Aug. 20) it went up to 280 cases."

Growing fears over the health impacts are emerging as the number of fires in Brazil surges, with more than 77,000 documented by the country's National Space Research Institute in the last year. About half of the fires occurred in the Amazon region, with most in the past month.



Members of the Kayapo indigenous group attend a meeting to discuss community issues in Bau village located on Kayapo indigenous territory in Altamira in Brazil's Amazon, Tuesday, Aug. 27, 2019. The fire is very close to Kayapo indigenous land located on the Bau indigenous reserve. (AP Photo/Leo Correa)

But as breathing-related ailments appear to be on the rise, attention to the issue has largely been overshadowed by growing acrimony between Brazil and European countries seeking to help fight Amazon fires and protect a region seen as vital to the health of the planet.

At a summit in France this week, G-7 nations pledged to help fight the flames and protect the rainforest by offering \$20 million, in addition to a separate \$12 million from Britain and \$11 million from Canada.

But Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, a far-right climate skeptic who took office this year with a promise to boost development in Latin America's biggest economy, questioned whether offers of international aid mask a plot to exploit the Amazon's resources and weaken Brazilian growth. On Tuesday, he said that his French counterpart President Emmanuel Macron had called him a liar and would have to apologize before Brazil considers accepting rainforest aid.

Macron has to retract those comments "and then we can speak," Bolsonaro said.



A lone tree stands in a deforested farm field near Porto Velho, Brazil, Tuesday, Aug. 27, 2019. While many of the recorded fires this year were set in already deforested areas by people clearing land for cultivation or pasture, Brazilian government figures indicate that they are much more widespread this year,

suggesting the threat to the vast ecosystem is intensifying. (AP Photo/Victor R. Caivano)



A youth from the Kayapo indigenous community bathes in the Bau River at dusk near his village on Bau indigenous land in Altamira in Brazil's Amazon, Monday, Aug. 26, 2019. Fires are burning very close to this Kayapo indigenous land located on the Bau indigenous reserve. (AP Photo/Leo Correa)



A women from the Kayapo indigenous community steps out of her home in her village on Bau indigenous land in Altamira in Brazil's Amazon, Monday, Aug. 26, 2019. Forest fires are burning very close to Kayapo indigenous land located on the Bau indigenous reserve. (AP Photo/Leo Correa)



Charred trees stand in an area scorched by wildfires in the Chiquitania Forest near Robore, Bolivia, Tuesday, Aug. 27, 2019. While global attention has been focused on fires burning across the Brazilian Amazon, neighboring Bolivia is battling its own vast blazes. (AP Photo/Juan Karita)

In a video message, Brazilian novelist Paulo Coelho offered an apology to France for what he called Bolsonaro's "hysteria," saying the Brazilian government had resorted to insults to dodge responsibility for the Amazon fires.

Meanwhile, within Brazil, a number of people said they supported Bolsonaro despite local and international criticism of his handling of the crisis, exposing a divide that has split the country.

Grace Quale, a hospital laboratory technician who attended a service at an evangelical church on Sunday, said that critics "want to overthrow our president," and that she didn't see a link between Bolsonaro's [environmental policies](#) and the number of people getting treatment for respiratory problems.

Mona Lisa Pereira, an agronomist, also said criticism of Brazil's government was skewed.



Wakonkra Kayapo, of the Kayapo indigenous community, carries his rifle as he searches for tracks left behind by suspected prospectors and loggers on Bau indigenous territory in Altamira, in Brazil's Amazon, where fires burn nearby, Tuesday, Aug. 27, 2019. "The forest will stay in its place. It can't be taken down. We take care the land", said the 68-year-old man who describes himself as a "small warrior." (AP Photo/Leo Correa)

"Germany had already been helping through NGOs and they couldn't prevent this," Pereira said. "It seems like this is the fire of a lifetime. But it's not. We have fires every year."

Others said in an [open letter](#) that the government's discourse and measures are leading to a "collapse in federal environmental management and stimulate environmental crimes inside and outside the Amazon."

More than 500 employees from the environmental regulator IBAMA signed the letter and included a list of emergency measures they recommended, including more qualified management and employees, and a greater budget and increased autonomy.

The Amazon has experienced an increased rate of fires during drought periods in the last 20 years, but the phenomenon this year is "unusual" because drought has not yet hit, said Laura Schneider of Rutgers University-New Brunswick.



In this time exposure, stars fill the sky over Bau village located on Kayapo indigenous territory in Altamira in Brazil's Amazon, Monday, Aug. 26, 2019. Fires are burning very close to Kayapo indigenous land located on the Bau indigenous reserve. (AP Photo/Leo Correa)

Schneider, an associate professor in the geography department, said fire is commonly used by people to clear land for cultivation, and the actual area burned this year must be measured for an accurate comparison with damage in past years.

While many of the recorded fires this year were set in already deforested areas by people clearing land for cultivation or pasture, Brazil government figures show that they are much more widespread this year, suggesting the threat to the vast Amazon ecosystem is intensifying.

But for now, more immediate consequences of the raging flames were becoming clear.

The world's largest rainforest is a major absorber of carbon dioxide, considered a critical defense against rising temperatures and other disruptions caused by climate change.



Bolivia's President Evo Morales talks on a phone as he looks out of a plane window to survey forests affected by fires in the Charagua province of Bolivia, Tuesday, Aug. 27, 2019. The largest blazes in Bolivia are in the Chiquitanía region, a zone of dry forest, farmland and open prairies that has seen an expansion of farming and ranching. (David Mercado/Pool Photo via AP)

The government in the Amazonian state of Rondonia has warned that the burning of land can produce smoke that can "greatly influence atmospheric pollution, putting the life of many at risk."

Experts there said that when exposed to smoke, residents can suffer from rhinitis, sinus and respiratory problems like asthma and bronchitis, while chronic exposure can also lead to pulmonary illnesses, including lung emphysema.

"We've seen that (Porto Velho) has been taken over by smoke, so inhaling those antigens and pathogens can harm the whole city's population," Ana Carolina Terra Cruz, a specialist in pulmonary illnesses, told the state government website.

On Tuesday, some clouds and a blue sky were partly visible in the Porto Velho morning light. But by the afternoon, haze had again settled, with smoke so thick that it darkened the usually blazing sun.



Members of Kayapo indigenous community unload supplies from a boat to their territorial monitoring base on the Curua River in the Bau indigenous land in Altamira in Brazil's Amazon, as fires burn nearby, Tuesday, Aug. 27, 2019. The base, called in Portuguese "Watching the land," is used as a spot to control who enters the territory, to avoid illegal fishing and the entrance of loggers and prospectors. (AP Photo/Leo Correa)

Pereira, the agronomist, said that smoke was "everywhere."

"It's bad for everyone," she said. "Not just our children."

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