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Fires Burn Out of Control in Brazil's Amazon Forest

by LADB Staff

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Out-of-control fires resulting from the devastating effects of El Nino weather phenomenon, commercial logging, agrarian reform, and slash-and-burn farming techniques are causing unprecedented destruction to Brazil's Amazon rain forest.

The region's worst fires in recent memory have destroyed vast stretches of savanna and pushed into rain forest normally too humid to burn. They have affected the state capital and reached inside the Yanomami reservation, home to 17,000 Yanomami Indians. Satellite photos show fires have also erupted in neighboring Suriname and Venezuela. Barely 0.1 cm of rain has fallen this year in the state of Roraima, and the drought a result of El Nino, a warming of waters in the Pacific that changes weather patterns worldwide- -turned the area into a tinderbox.

Meteorologists predict the rains will not come for several more weeks. The Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas da Amazonia (INPA) said the fires have consumed nearly 37,000 sq km of the state, and the nearly 2,000 focal points are moving without control in various directions.

On March 20, Roraima Gov. Neudo Campos said the fire has burned about 17% of the state's savanna and forests. Boa Vista, a city of 150,000, is covered by a grey cloud of smoke, and the streets are under a layer of ash. Hospitals are seeing about a 30% increase in the normal number of patients, most with respiratory problems. The biggest blaze, at Apiau, a farming community on the edge of the rain forest 120 km west of Boa Vista, was finally extinguished March 24, but 1,000 other fires were burning in the Apiau area, one of the worst hit by the flames.

Despite efforts of more than 1,000 firefighters, "it will take at least 20 days to put out the fires," said Gen. Luiz Edmundo Maia de Carvalho, commander of the First Infantry Jungle Brigade.

Yanomami villages threatened

Firefighters are struggling to protect the Yanomamis from the conflagration, but it may be too late. By March 23, the fires had pushed 30 km into the Yanomami reservation, home to the world's largest Stone Age tribe. While the fires have not yet reached the Yanomami villages, they have significantly affected their health and left them without food, said Aparecido Jose Dias, bishop of Roraima.

"More than from the fire, the Yanomamis are suffering from the illnesses that accompany the fire and the drought, and from the loss of their crops," said Dias, president of the Catholic Church's commission for indigenous people. "The drought has already destroyed all the crops of the Indians in Roraima and, without a harvest, they will have no seeds for the next crop." He said the Indians are looking at severe shortages of food until at least 1999. The Yanomami believe the fires are a sign of impending doom, a view beginning to be shared by some environmentalists. Meanwhile, Yanomami shamans perform religious ceremonies to bring the desperately needed rain. "This is the sign of the apocalypse for them," said Guilherme Danoli, an Italian priest who has lived among the Yanomami since 1989. "They are beating on the walls of their houses to exorcise the evil spirits."

Government accepts international support

On March 22, the government launched a long-awaited air war against the giant fires. For the first time, water-dumping helicopters attacked the fast-moving flames in areas nearly inaccessible by land, but the helicopters were grounded after a day because of reduced visibility from smoke.

Both Venezuela and Argentina have sent firefighters and equipment to help battle the blazes, and on March 23, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso said he would accept help from the UN. "Initially we were offering long-term technical cooperation, but now it's an emergency situation," the UN spokeswoman said.

Government response called inadequate

Political wrangling delayed federal aid for more than two months after Gov. Campos declared a state of emergency. The environmental group Friends of the Earth (FoE) criticized government firefighting efforts, saying they had been "virtually nonexistent." "Without a doubt, the efforts are insufficient in the sense that they haven't even properly started," said Roberto Smeraldi, FoE's Amazon program coordinator in Brazil. "People want to treat this like a nature disaster, like an earthquake or tidal wave, where nothing can be done," said Philip Fearnside, a scientist at the National Institute for Amazon Research in the city of Manaus. "But it's not just El Nino, economic and social factors also have an impact."

Settlers streaming into the region and increased logging are making the rain forest increasingly vulnerable to burning. To plant on the Amazon's weak soil, settlers must cut down more forest each year and then burn it to create a layer of ash, which fertilizes the soil. During dry years, the burning often gets out of control, but even in wet years, open pasture leaves the forest exposed. "These fires are the result of an archaic method used in Amazonia, which uses fires to clear the land," said Ademir Passarinho, the local head of the Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e Recursos Naturais (IBAMA). "One of the biggest threats to environmental protection is poverty."

On March 24, the World Wildlife Federation (WWF) called on the government to do more to change the detrimental farming techniques. It also called for better fire prevention measures and better education. Agrarian reform could increase deforestation. A recent government report blames agrarian reform for contributing to deforestation in several areas. The report says a major reason for the disappearance of forests in recent years has been activities of small farmers on lands distributed by the government. Data from the Instituto Nacional de Colonizacão y Reforma Agraria (INCRA) showed that the majority of the land earmarked for settlements in the last decade has been in the Amazon. In mid-March, government officials unveiled measures they said would reduce the widespread destruction of the rain forest. The measures include settling landless families in areas of the Amazon already deforested. An estimated 600,000 sq km, an area bigger than France, has already been cleared and 200,000 sq km of that is idle (see NotiSur, 11/07/98).

To slow land invasions by landless groups in the Amazon region, another measure will rule out forested areas invaded by campesinos from inclusion in the government's land-reform program. The government will suspend distribution of land deeds for new settlements over 100 hectares in the Amazon and scrap programs that encourage landowners to cut down trees. Desertification has

advanced over 12% of the northeast sector of Brazil, the poorest area of the country, said the director of the government program to combat desertification, Heitor Matallo Junior, on March 23. He said the government is counting on state governments in the affected areas to promote training courses for workers and nongovernmental organizations in techniques to stop desertification. (Sources: Inter Press Service, 03/13/98; Reuter, 03/18/98, 03/19/98, 03/22-24/98; The Miami Herald, 03/19/98, 03/23/98, 03/24/98; Associated Press, 03/20/98, 03/22/98, 03/24/98; BBC News, 03/23/98, 03/25/98; Spanish news service EFE, 03/18/98, 03/23/98, 03/26/98)

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