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Hunger and Devastation Follow Fires in Brazilian Amazon Rain Forest

by LADB Staff

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Although the long-awaited rains have finally come, extinguishing the devastating fires that raged through large areas of the Amazon savanna and into the rain forest, huge problems remain. The Yanomami Indians and others who live in the area are facing serious health and nutrition problems. In addition, experts fear new fires during the coming dry season in subequatorial Brazil. The fires, which burned out of control for more than two months, destroyed up to 40,000 sq km of land in northern Brazil, mostly scrub-covered savanna, although some rain forest normally too humid to burn was also affected (see NotiSur, 10/17/97 and 03/27/98). About 25% of the state of Roraima was damaged, including parts of the reservations of Yanomami and other Indian groups, which cover about 55% of the state.

Many fires were started by campesinos using slash-and-burn farming techniques to clear their land. The fires were helped by drought conditions from the weather phenomenon El Niño and by high winds. Carlos Pereira Monteiro, head of a UN team of firefighting specialists, called the fires "an environmental disaster without precedent on this planet." The gods answer calls for rain. The first heavy rains in six months finally fell on March 31 in Roraima. The rains come a day after two Caiapo Indian shamans were flown to the Yanomami reservation to perform a special ritual to bring rain. "I don't know if it's a coincidence, but it certainly seemed to have done the trick," said Alan Suassuna, spokesman for the federal Indian bureau in Boa Vista, 700 km northwest of the capital, Brasília.

Scientific experts said it will take a century for the destroyed sections of the forest to return, and many plant and animal species will be lost forever. Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e Recursos Naturais (IBAMA) officials prepared to carry out detailed studies of the fire's impact on the region's wildlife, using snakes, birds, and some rodent species to gauge the losses. While IBAMA began its research, the international environment group Friends of the Earth calculated that the fires released 125 million metric tons of carbon into the atmosphere, equivalent to all the carbon emissions released in São Paulo, South America's largest city, over 10 years. "We're waiting for more complete and reliable data on the affected area to have a more definitive estimate," said Roberto Smeraldi, Friends of the Earth representative. "But the scale is enough to show the severity of this phenomenon."

Experts assess damage and eye future

As the fires subsided, the Brazilian government and international organizations examined ways to prevent further fires in the Amazon. World Bank representatives held talks with Brazilian disaster relief officials regarding a possible loan to fund prevention and detection of forest fires. Brazilian Environment Minister Gustavo Krause said an initial estimate set damage to farms and grazing land in Roraima at about US\$15 million. He said President Fernando Henrique Cardoso had authorized the creation of a rapid-deployment brigade to prevent and fight fires, with training for new personnel and acquisition of new equipment, but the brigade will take two years to set up.

Meanwhile, officials will identify the areas of the Amazon most at risk from fire, and crews of volunteer firefighters will be formed with support from the armed forces, which will provide transport. Experts are concerned about the risk of fires in the Amazon south of Roraima where the subequatorial dry season begins in May. "There has been a dramatic shortage of rain [in the current wet season], and we have a particularly dangerous situation," said Environment Minister Krause. He said a huge arc of the Amazon, running from Rondonia state, on the border with Bolivia, to Para state, on the Atlantic coast, was particularly at risk.

Farming and logging have eaten into rain-forest areas, reducing the natural humidity and resistance to fire. Krause said the risk would be greatest from June to August, when farmers traditionally burn land to clear vegetation and fertilize the soil with ash. Ademir Passarinho, IBAMA's superintendent in Roraima, said many campesinos whose land did not burn have chopped down trees and small bushes and piled them up fields ready for a lighted match. "There will be more fires in the fields," said Passarinho. "It's the only farming technique these people know. Until someone comes up with tractors and fertilizers for them, they will keep on using fire."

Residents in fire-damaged areas face desperate conditions

As assessments continued, international commitments for assistance began. Even before the fires were completely out, relief workers were stockpiling emergency supplies for the estimated 56,000 farmers and Indians whose lands went up in smoke. Most of Roraima's 32,000 indigenous people were without adequate food and water, said fire-brigade captain Kleber Gomes Cerquinho.

The UN office for humanitarian affairs in Geneva has asked donor countries for food and medicines, as well as tools to dig wells. The European Commission pledged US\$1.1 billion to aid victims, money that will be channelled through nongovernmental organizations. The Yanomami Indians are now facing a malaria epidemic, a Catholic missionary warned. "The number of cases is exploding," said Carlo Zacchini, who has worked with the Yanomami for 30 years. He said 1,100 members of the isolated Aorais community near the Venezuelan border were particularly at risk. About 800 Yanomamis there were already sick with a strain of malaria that, if untreated, quickly leads to coma and death. Of 172 Indians living in Paapiu, another village, 117 were also sick with various types of malaria, Zacchini said.

Anthropologists believe the Yanomamis have lived in what is now northern Brazil and southern Venezuela for about 2,000 years. Catholic missionaries first encountered them in the 1920s, but they lived in isolation until tens of thousands of prospectors (garimpeiros) poured onto their lands to pan for gold in the 1970s and 1980s. With no immunity to the diseases introduced by the outsiders, the Yanomamis were nearly decimated. [Source: Associated Press, 03/31/98; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 04/03/98; Reuters, 03/31-04/03/98, 04/07/98; Inter Press Service, 04/07/98; BBC News, 03/25/98, 04/09/98; Spanish news service EFE, 03/25/98, 04/17/98]

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