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## Fires Burning In Much of Brazil

by LADB Staff

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Forest fires are burning out of control in 15 of Brazil's 27 states. A prolonged drought coupled with the traditional slash-and-burn method of clearing land for planting has led to a disaster that, to some degree, is repeated every year in Brazil (see NotiSur, 1998-03-27). Environmentalists say government budget cuts have made fighting the fires, mostly in national parks and the Amazon, more difficult. Damage from the fires ranges from destruction of local flora and fauna to a long-term impact on human health and loss of revenue from tourism.

Brazil's central region is a rapidly expanding agricultural frontier, and farmers burn their fields before planting. The burning is worst along the southern rim of the Amazon in a three-state strip known as the "arc of deforestation," but this year fires are also affecting southeastern Brazil as well as parts of Bolivia and Paraguay.

A government campaign to educate settlers about the dangers of unsupervised burning during the dry season has been largely ignored, in part because of the high rates of poverty and illiteracy in the areas. This year, the lack of rain and low humidity have increased the fires. The hardest hit regions of the southeast and central-west have had no rain in more than 70 days.

Sao Paulo, with more than 10 million residents, is suffering its worst drought in 24 years. Just 1.4 mm of rain fell in August compared to the normal 40-mm average rainfall for the month. "The humidity in Sao Paulo is less than 20%. That's very unusual," said Carlos Nobre, head of the weather-forecasting division of the Instituto Nacional de Pesquisas Espaciales (INPE) in Sao Jose dos Campos.

Brasilia, where aridity is similar to the Sahara Desert, has registered humidity between 12% and 20%, low enough to be dangerous to health according to the World Health Organization (WHO). Fires threaten rain forest and Pantanal wetlands. In August, the US meteorological satellite NOAA recorded 30,213 fires. Because satellite equipment cannot penetrate clouds or thick smoke, the total was probably higher.

The INPE said the fires affect 66% of the country. The high numbers of fires registered the first week of September threaten to break the record of 33,600 fires set in September 1998. The Pantanal the world's largest wetlands and part of the Amazon rain forest are threatened by the fires in Mato Grosso state, where nearly half the fires are burning.

On Sept. 4, Mato Grosso declared a state of emergency. In the state capital Cuiaba, 600 km northwest of Rio de Janeiro, temperatures hit 55 degrees Celsius and clouds of red dust mixed with smoke covered the city. "Of every 100 people, 90 have respiratory problems," said Angela Lizete Georgen, state health director. Mato Grosso do Sul said it was considering a similar declaration, with more than 2,700 fires raging. The blazes at times burned through power lines, cutting off energy to parts of 10 cities. The airport at Corumba was shutdown for eight days because of lack of visibility.

from the smoke, the newspaper O Globo reported. The Brazilian electric energy agency requested that energy companies take urgent measures to control fires and reduce damage to power lines. Since July, the fires have caused 58 power failures on transmission lines in Maranhao and Para states.

Instituto Brasileiro de Meio Ambiente e Recursos Naturais (IBAMA) officials admitted that the situation is out of control in some center-west areas. Government airplanes sent to Mato Grosso to help firefighters were unable to fly near the area because of the dense smoke cover. In Para, more than 5,000 fires were counted in August. Sao Paulo, Minas Gerais, and Tocantins are also seriously affected.

### *Environment minister declares state of alert*

Because of the prolonged drought, dim prospects for rain, and mounting health and environmental problems, on Sept. 4, Environment Minister Jose Sarney Filho banned for 60 days permission for controlled burning and canceled previous permits. But the measure was adopted late in the game and is expected to have limited effect because most fires are set without government knowledge.

Moreover, the ministry lacks the resources to enforce policies. Sarney also declared a state of alert throughout the Amazon. His decree notified all civil and militarized police, plus the Policia Federal and prosecutors from IBAMA to prevent any field burning. The decree subjects anyone burning fields or forest land to arrest and prosecution. Conviction could bring a jail term of up to two years and a fine of US\$2,600.

### *Environmentalists say government policies partly to blame*

Environmental organizations accused the government of not acting energetically to reduce the incidence of fire and of not enforcing the criminal statutes regarding environmental crime because of pressure from powerful industrialists and landowners.

Sarney called landowners and farmers who burn to clear land "irresponsible outlaws," but he exempted the government from blame, instead pointing to the drought that is much worse than in previous years. "We know that at this time of year there is drought and burning," said Garo Batmanian, head of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in Brazil. "We can't treat this as an emergency and forget that it's part of Brazilian reality."

Roberto Smeraldi, head of a program to protect the Amazon with Friends of the Earth (FOE), said the Environment Ministry failed to keep its promise earlier this year to put more emphasis on prevention and training programs. "This year the Environment Ministry seemed to be taking what we considered a more conscious, more forward-looking stance in how to combat the fires, but this has failed to translate into practical measures," he said. "I would say the fires this year are more or less within normal levels, but we are talking about normal levels that are terrible," said Smeraldi. "These are normal levels that lead to irreversible damage to the environment every year."

Environmentalists also said the government austerity program, which cut the Environment Ministry's budget by one-third, contributed to the problem. Hope for containment is now largely pinned on rain. In Parana, the state most affected in southern Brazil, rain fell on Sept. 6,

extinguishing the fires on the Paraguayan border. But INPE predicts the drought will continue throughout most of the country until at least mid-September. (Sources: Notimex, 08/31/99, 09/01/99; Reuters, 09/01/99, 09/03/99; Associated Press, 09/02/99, 09/05/99; The Miami Herald, 09/03/99, 09/06/99; Inter Press Service, Xinhua, 09/06/99, 09/07/99; Spanish news service EFE, 09/04/99, 09/06-08/99)

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