

August 25, 2019

### **Open Letter Regarding the Recent Fires in the Brazilian Amazon**

As an international society of anthropologists who work with indigenous and traditional peoples in Amazonia, we join our voices to those in Brazil and throughout the world who are outraged by the swathe of fires burning across northern Brazil. The smoke of these fires has famously blackened the daytime sky of Brazil's largest city, shaking the world to notice the existential threats facing the peoples and ecosystems of the world's largest remaining tropical rainforest. And while reports have correctly laid the blame on the Brazilian government for its feckless response to the conflagrations, we contend that the President's public statements and policy proposals—which so clearly signal a racist contempt for indigenous rights—are the true fuel that's driving these fires.

The explosion of fires is not natural, and this year's record-breaking conflagration is not new. Indigenous peoples have managed fire in an ecologically sustainable fashion for millennia. But since Brazil began to encourage agricultural colonization in the region during the 1970s, the Amazon's dry season has been eagerly awaited as the "burning season:" time for ranchers and soy-planters to clear large extensions of forest, let them dry, and strike the match. In this way, over 20% of the original forest's extent has been converted to pasture and field over the last few decades. The vast majority of this agricultural expansion has proceeded through illegal land-grabs, in which elites deforest land, evict peasant and indigenous groups at gunpoint, and manipulate the judicial system to launder their ill-gotten lands into deeded properties. Some of Brazil's largest companies are involved in this cycle, in which traditional communities and their forests and rivers fall prey to an unsustainably expanding agricultural system.

It is a system in which fire and political maneuvers are the weapons that colonists use to invade and rob indigenous territories. And though in operation for half a century, it's a system whose backers and beneficiaries have finally arrived at the very pinnacle of power in Brazil. Since taking office earlier this year, President Jair Bolsonaro and the "ruralist" parliamentary block have sought to open indigenous lands up to mining and logging operations; have slashed the budgets and oversight potential of environmental agencies; have backed a "economic liberty" suite of policies for agribusiness; have vowed that the government will not demarcate "one more centimeter" of indigenous land in Brazil, and have taken steps to try to decertify (rob) existing indigenous reserves. The parliamentary assault on indigenous peoples and on Amazonian ecosystems is vast, coordinated, and has been decades in the making. Though there have been signs of hope—last month Brazil's Supreme Court unanimously rejected Bolsonaro's attempt to assign oversight of indigenous territories to the Ministry of Agriculture—the ruralists have a litany of schemes in the queue. The idea is to act for "Brazil above all." This slogan was no doubt on the minds of ranchers and farmers in the Amazonian towns of Novo Progresso and Altamira, where on August 10 thousands of acres of felled forest were set ablaze. A week after this coordinated "Day of Fire" (which had been announced in a local newspaper on Aug. 5), with the flames still raging (and smoke settling on São Paulo), local farmers chirped on social media that the fires were meant to signal support for the President's policies, since Bolsonaro "supports those of us who produce."

It seems that all is burning in Brazil. Just a few days from now marks the one-year anniversary of the fire at the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro, in which ethnographic and archaeological treasures, precious pieces of art and manuscripts—all irreplaceable testaments to the staggering cultural diversity of Brazil—were reduced to ashes. As anthropologists who have the privilege of working with the originary peoples of Amazonia, we also have the obligation to condemn the racist rhetoric and genocidal policies pursued by the current Brazilian government. Those who would pose the future of Amazonia as a question of “production” vs. idle, unutilized land are committing grievous errors: the human rights of indigenous peoples, and the priceless value to the global ecosystem that the forest produces, must not be sacrificed as “costs of doing business.” Though we applaud the efforts of President Emmanuel Macron of France in demanding that Mr. Bolsonaro change course, we are skeptical whether he would—or even could, given the power of the ruralists in Congress. Though international pressure must continue—and global citizens must prioritize consumer- and investment-choices that preserve the forest—ultimately the Brazilian people will decide the fate of the leaders who have placed so much in peril for so long. We encourage citizens near and far to continue to watch the Amazon even after the rains cool the fires this year. Because burning season comes again next year, and the year after, and so on until no trees remain lest we all remain attentive, vigilant, and supportive of the indigenous peoples of Amazonia.



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