
Amid Amazon Fires, Brazil President Weakens Environment Agency: Report

28/08/2019



BRASILIA: As the world recoils at the sight of fires ravaging Brazil's Amazon jungle, the nation's far-right government is undermining the agency charged with protecting the rainforest, Reuters has learned from interviews with ten current and former employees, public records and a review of internal government reports.

Conservative President Jair Bolsonaro has made no secret of his disdain for the public body, known as Ibama, which he has publicly rebuked as an impediment to the nation's development.

Since he took office on January 1, Ibama's budget has shrunk by 25% as part of government-wide belt tightening, according to internal government data collected by the opposition PSOL party and shared with Reuters. Among the cuts: funding for prevention and control of forest fires was reduced 23%.

New leadership at Ibama also has made it tougher for the agency to crack down on illegal logging, farming and mining that have despoiled nearly 12,000 square kilometers (4,633 square miles) in the [Amazon this year](#), all of the former and current employees told Reuters.

For example, field agents have seen new restrictions on their ability to destroy heavy equipment found at the scene of environmental crimes, a long-standing tactic to slow land-grabbers, five of the people said.

In addition, an elite corps of Ibama forest cops has not seen action in the Amazon this year, a

first since the heavily-armed, highly-trained unit was launched five years ago, according to four of the people familiar with the matter. Instead, these special agents have been confined largely to desk duty, the people say, or assigned field tasks far from hot spots in the rainforest.

Punishment of environmental criminals has declined substantially [on Bolsonaro's watch](#). Through August 23, the number of fines issued by Ibama fell 29% compared to the same period last year, while the collective value of those penalties tumbled 43%, government statistics show.

On Monday, 54 Ibama employees sent a letter to Eduardo Bim, the agency's president, expressing "our immense concern with how environmental policy is being conducted in Brazil." The letter, seen by Reuters, listed six changes the staffers said are needed at Ibama and other federal environmental bodies, including new hires, sufficient money for enforcement work and operational autonomy.

Brazil's Environment Ministry, which oversees Ibama, declined repeated requests for comment about budget cuts and other alleged changes at the agency. A spokesman told Reuters on Aug. 14 that previous governments were to blame for Ibama's challenges, which he said included shoddy equipment and poorly maintained field offices.

The spokesman said Ibama remains an important player in the administration's plans to battle the Amazon fires. The ministry has said previously that it takes its role in protecting the rainforest seriously, and that illegal deforestation continues to be treated as a criminal activity.

Bolsonaro's environmental policies have come under intense scrutiny in recent days as images of the burning Amazon have sparked international outrage and concern about the consequences for global warming.

Through July, destruction of Brazil's rainforest is up 67% compared to the same period a year ago, according to preliminary data released by the country's National Institute for Space Research (INPE). Nearly 80,000 fires have been recorded this year through Aug. 24, the highest level since at least 2013, INPE says.

Environmentalists say Brazilian ranchers and farmers are intentionally igniting the jungle canopy to expand their operations illegally, emboldened by Bolsonaro's pro-development, anti-regulation message. Reuters was unable to confirm this claim.

"Beyond inciting, he (Bolsonaro) has systematically dismantled all the state organs that enforce environmental protection," said Alfredo Sirkis, executive director of the Brazil Climate Center and co-founder of the country's Green Party.

Environment and Renewable Natural Resources. (Reuters)

Bolsonaro's Environment Minister Ricardo Salles, speaking at a real estate event on Monday, said drivers of deforestation, such as wildcat mining, have been around for decades and did not begin with the current administration. He said a lack of economic opportunity in the Amazon is what pushes people to act illegally.

"Poverty is the big problem of the environment," Salles said.

Salles did not respond to a request for comment from Reuters.

FEAR AND MISTRUST

Ibama attracted global acclaim for its role in curbing Brazil's deforestation by 80 percent between 2004 and 2012, utilizing a mix of satellite data and boots-on-the-ground operations to attack trouble spots.

Leftist President Dilma Rousseff began to roll back federal environmental enforcement in the name of economic development upon assuming office in 2011. Reuters reported that her government had shut 91 of 168 Ibama field offices as of 2012. Government austerity stemming from Brazil's deep 2015-16 recession saw further cuts at the agency.

"With the economic crisis we started having constraints due to the fiscal situation, but it wasn't just for the environmental area, it was everyone," said Izabella Teixeira, environment minister from 2010 to 2016.

The Bolsonaro administration has taken a particularly combative tone with Ibama, which sits under the Ministry of Environment and is responsible for enforcing its policies. On the campaign trail, Bolsonaro railed against Ibama for creating an "industry of fines."

The shift in environmental strategy makes it unlikely Ibama can bolster its dwindling enforcement ranks, which have dropped 45% since 2010, according to an excerpt of an internal agency report viewed by Reuters.

Ibama employs roughly 780 enforcement agents; that is one for every 11,000 square kilometers of Brazil's territory that must be policed, the figures show. Nearly one quarter of those agents are eligible to retire at any moment, according to the report.

A tract of Amazon jungle is seen after a fire in Boca do Acre, Amazonas state, Brazil. (Reuters)

Ibama employees said they have also been hamstrung by new restrictions on their ability to destroy logging and mining equipment found in illegally deforested areas.

Setting earthmovers, chainsaws and other machines ablaze in the jungle prevents criminals from returning to business as usual once agents leave the scene. Under previous administrations, such requests by field agents were routinely approved by Ibama's director of enforcement, five people familiar with the situation told Reuters.

Bolsonaro, however, denounced this practice in April, after Ibama set fire to trucks and tractors in the Amazon state of Rondonia.

"It's not right to burn anything, nothing," Bolsonaro said in a widely shared TV clip. "That is not the procedure, that is not our guidance."

Since then, Bolsonaro's new director of enforcement at Ibama, Olivadi Azevedo, has not approved any requests to destroy equipment, according to five people familiar with the matter.

Reuters was unable to ascertain exactly how many such requests have been submitted this year, how many are pending and how many have been rejected. In an April 22 letter to Bim, Ibama's president, which was viewed by Reuters, some 25 Ibama division chiefs, superintendents and analysts sought clarity on the toughened policy. They have yet to receive a response, three of the people who spoke to the news agency said.

Azevedo declined to comment, directing questions to the Environment Ministry press office. Bim directed Reuters to Ibama's press office, which in turn said it had passed the request to the Environment Ministry.

ELITE FORCE FROZEN

Another change is the grounding this year of Ibama's Special Enforcement Unit by Bolsonaro government appointees, according to four people with direct knowledge of the matter. Ibama has relied on this elite force to carry out operations in areas of the rainforest that are dangerous and difficult to reach.

Known by the Portuguese acronym GEF, the team currently is comprised of 13 agents who met rigorous military-style endurance standards for selection, according to a person with direct knowledge of the matter. Ibama's operating plan provides for GEF to be sent into the field roughly 10 times in 2019, the person said.

Ibama staffers have requested at least twice this year that GEF be deployed on raids that almost always target the Amazon, but Azevedo, the enforcement director, has not signed off on their deployment, according to the four people with direct knowledge of the situation.

In the meantime, Brazil is losing the equivalent of one and a half soccer fields of rainforest every minute in the Amazon.