
Amazon continues to burn. Droughts and arson fires destroy extraordinary biodiversity

Last year it dominated the headlines. One year later, as Covid-19 rages on, it is barely mentioned. Yet the Amazon, in Brazil in particular, continues to burn at a greater intensity than last year, when the situation was already serious. Other regions of high ecological value, such as Pantanal, on the border between Brazil and Bolivia, are also engulfed in flames. The stories recorded by SIR testify to an increasingly alarming situation. "According to Brazil's National Institute for Space Research (IMPE), wildfires increased by 34% compared to last year. Other agencies reported an increase of 28%. At any rate, there is a sharp increase compared to 2019, estimated to be a record-breaking year by all.

The fact is that fires increase along with deforestation, unrelentingly",

said **Luis Ventura**, a lay missionary and a representative of CIMI indigenous missionary Council, connected to the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil, contacted in Roraima where he lives, in the far north of the country, close to the border with Venezuela. "Fires are burning primarily to the south and east of the rainforest," he added. Not by chance, "those are areas marked by expanding soybean and corn crops, territories already devastated by estate and commodity-driven deforestation." Confronted with this disaster, "the Government has a shadowy stance, failing to protect the natural environment and the rights of the local people, and withholding official figures. Continuous advocacy is crucial and European governments have a central role to play in this respect." **Out-of-control fires in Pantanal.** Unprecedented fires are now ravaging the Pantanal wetlands stretching into the States of Mato Grosso and Southern Mato Grosso, extending into Bolivia. There were over 200 fires in August, 164 in September, according to investigative journalism website Agência Pública, reporting that about half of the indigenous territories are affected. *"We are facing Covid-19, hot weather, drought, with thick clouds of smoke now surrounding the city".* said **dom Joao Bergamasco**, bishop of Corumbá, a city located in the heart of the Pantanal.

“This biome is characterized by great biodiversity, featuring a multitude of wildlife, lakes, marshes and swamps,” the bishop pointed out. The area is affected by severe drought. Consequently, the fires broke out as early as April and May. There are 40° C with a 48° heat index. Fires increased threefold compared to a year ago, when they were already on the rise”. Drought and heat, therefore, play a major role. On top of this there is human behaviour: *“Fires caused by improper waste disposal, fishermen, farmers burning brushwood in pastures. The situation is extremely worrying.”* However, according to the bishop, ascribing the situation to planned arson attacks, as often happens in the Amazon, is hardly possible: “The Pantanal is not an agricultural region, but a pastureland marked by family and subsistence farming. Yet, it is a very fragile territory. Mining exploitation for iron, manganese and other resources is increasing.” But there are also cases of arson. In the Mato Grosso do Sul, for example, 5 farm owners are under investigation by the Federal Police for destroying 25 hectares of land. The testimony of the Salesian missionary from Padua, **Father Pasquale Forin**, from the area near Corumbá: “Last year was a disaster - he told SIR - On my way back from a trip, I traveled along 430 kilometres of devastated land between Campo Grande and Corumbá. And this year the fires broke out earlier. *The heavy rains extinguished the fires in mid-August, but now they surely resumed, although local news outlets barely mention this phenomenon, pretending that it doesn't exist.* But the dark clouds of smoke show that the fires are still burning. In the past few days there were reports of a huge fire which cannot be extinguished in the Mato Grosso, the northernmost state.” Father Pasquale is almost certainly referring to the area of the Encontro das Aguas State Park, home to the world's largest jaguar population, 85% of which was destroyed, amounting to an ecological and environmental disaster. Father Forin goes on: “I live in the countryside, where I have been assisting small farmers for decades, capable of successfully controlling their land. The fires did not spread here, but we are worried, they might spread from the nearby hills. The area is surrounded by what is known here as *fumaça*, we have difficulty breathing”. The missionary also supports the idea of multiple causes: “The soil is very dry with strong winds, sometimes even a cigarette butt can ignite a fire, often farmers burn the pastures to fertilize the land. Of course, in some cases, there are also arsonists. *However, we see scarce involvement of political leaders. The State arrives when it's too late, and with few means.*” **Also Bolivia facing devastating fires.** The Brazilian Pantanal is burning, and so is neighbouring Bolivia: wildfires are reported not only in the Bolivian Pantanal, in the easternmost part of the country, but also in the Amazon, in Chiquitanía, in Chaco, on the border with Paraguay, marked by the dramatic effects of the drought. Some 12,500 fires were reported this year in the department of Santa Cruz, and approximately 8,550 in the department of Beni.

bishop of the Apostolic Vicariate of Pando. Many of these are "small", covering an area of 10 to 20 hectares, or few kilometres of forest and meadow. Smoke is frequently detected and even the sky is covered with clouds of smoke. It's painful to see the fire reaching 20-metre-high trees." *"Often large landowners and small farmers and cattle breeders" are equally to blame. "Some promise easy returns by increasing cattle ranching."* In the last few weeks, the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network of Bolivia (REPAM), chaired by Msgr. Coter, asked "legislative authorities to repeal the laws that permit the fires that devastated Bolivia, along with the subsequent regulations that give the green light to GM crops. REPAM called on the government to take effective measures to protect biodiversity, and on economic and social organizations to act as guardians of the common home. In fact, *the interim government installed after the fall of Evo Morales failed to question the measures that facilitated fires in pasture land.* "As a matter of fact - concludes Msgr. Coter - the incumbent executive paved the way not only for GMO soybeans, as was already the case, but also for cotton and corn." (*) *journalist at "La vita del popolo" (Treviso)*

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