

At First, I thought I Was Fighting to Save Rubber Trees. Now I Realize I Am Fighting for Humanity: The Fortieth Newsletter (2019).



Roberto Burle Marx, drawing from the Pithecolobium series (1961).

Dear Friends,

Greetings from the desk of the **Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research**.

At the United Nations General Assembly, Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro opened the proceedings with the rather bizarre comment that the Amazon – which has been on fire for weeks – is 'practically untouched' and that a 'lying and sensationalist media' had been fanning the flames of fake news. The Amazon, 60% of which is

inside Brazil, is not – Bolsonaro said – the ‘heritage of humankind’. It is Brazilian territory, he said, and if Brazil wants to cut it down, then so be it.

Following Bolsonaro, Trump made some incoherent remarks at the UN about sovereignty and patriotism. While he claimed that he was a nationalist who stood for the sovereignty of nations, Trump openly threatened Iran and Venezuela with war. Their sovereignty was of no consequence to Trump.

[My commentary on *Democracy Now*, 25 September 2019](#)

The antidote to Trump came from the Prime Minister of Barbados – Mia Amor Mottley – who stood with Cuba and Venezuela and who offered a truly powerful statement on the climate catastrophe from the standpoint of the small island states.

[Prime Minister Mia Amor Mottley, United Nations, 27 September 2019](#)

Mottley represents reason. Bolsonaro and Trump represent unreason. As part of his speech, Bolsonaro attacked Raoni Metuktire, a leader of the indigenous Brazilian Kayapó people. Bolsonaro said that Metuktire represents foreign governments rather than his own community or Brazilians. NGOs, Bolsonaro said, ‘insist on treating and keeping our Indians as true cavemen’. This is fiery stuff. It is also racist. Chief Raoni, in his composed but sharp manner, responded that Bolsonaro’s war on the Amazon is ‘not just bad for us indigenous people. It is a disaster for all of humanity’.

From our Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research office in São Paulo comes Red Alert #3, a quick primer on the situation grounded in factual documentation and reason. You can download it [here](#) and read it below. For a more in depth discussion of the Amazon, read our fourteenth **dossier**, published in March by our São Paulo office.



Red Alert #3. Fires in Brazil's Amazon.

What is Going on the Amazon?

On 19 August, the skies over São Paulo, Brazil's most populated city, went dark in the middle of the afternoon. Debris and smoke from fires in the Amazon clouded the city. These fires had been set on 10 and 11 August by *ruralistas* in the region of Novo Progresso and Altamira (in the state of Pará). These *ruralistas* include the big landowners, landed farmers, land grabbers, land dealers, loggers, and – in their most developed form – agribusinesses. On these days, they held 'Days of Fire' to demonstrate their support for Brazil's president Jair Bolsonaro.

The fires raised a global alarm. Inside Brazil, individuals, civil society organisations, political parties, and research institutes – in their different ways – criticised the Amazon fire and its implications. Protests took place around the world against the Amazon fires, since it is well-recognised that the Amazon is one of the major carbon sinks on the planet. If there is 25% deforestation of the Amazon, then the rainforest would have reached a point of no return. At that point, the vegetation loses its capacity to regenerate and would likely devolve from a rain forest into a savannah.

The destruction of the Amazon could lead to higher temperatures and greater climate instability. This is why the Amazon fires became a global issue so quickly.

What Explains the Increase in the Amazon Forest Fires of 2019?

The Institute of Environmental Research of the Amazon (IPAM) recorded that the fires in the Amazon in the first eight months of 2019 exceeded by 60% the average number of fires over the past three years for the same eight-month period. The number of fires in these eight months of 2019 totalled 32,728.

IPAM notes that these fires emerged both from deliberate use of fire to clear the forest, and from the impact that the deforestation has on the creation of dry bushland that is tinder for accidental fires. ‘The ten Amazonian municipalities that recorded the highest number of fires’, wrote the study’s researchers, ‘were also the ones with the highest rates of deforestation’.

Since the victory of Jair Bolsonaro to Brazil’s Presidency, the *ruralistas* have made it clear that they define the government policy regarding forests, land, logging, and agriculture. The choice of Ricardo Salles as Bolsonaro’s Minister of Environment sent the *ruralistas*’ message out clearly. Salles has strong links to the *ruralistas* – much stronger than any link to the environmental movement. Both Bolsonaro and Salles have made it clear that they serve the interests of the *ruralistas* rather than the country’s robust environmental policies and agencies.

The domination of the *ruralistas* over policymaking in Brazil and their ability to undermine the regulatory framework within a short period of time are responsible for the Amazon forest fires.



Vija Clemins, Forest Fire, 1965-66

What is the Bolsonaro Government Doing to Undermine the Environment?

1. Undermining Regulatory Agencies. Bolsonaro's government has begun to cut the budgets of environmental agencies, such as the Brazilian Institute of Environmental and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA). The government sliced off 24% of IBAMA's budget from R\$363.3 [US\$89.9] million to R\$279.4 [US\$68.2] million.
2. Undermining Legal Protections. Bolsonaro's son Senator Flávio Bolsonaro drafted a bill with Senator Márcio Bittar (PL 2.362/2019) that would eliminate the protection of 167 million hectares of forest – about 30% of Brazil's forest cover. The attempt to destroy the legal barriers for the *ruralistas* remains alive and well.
3. Undermining the Amazon Fund. In 2008, under former President Lula Inácio da Silva – who **remains** in jail as a political refugee – the Amazon Fund was created to raise funds to monitor, prevent, and combat deforestation as well as to support projects for the conservation of the Amazon and the sustainable use of its resources. The Bolsonaro government tried to reallocate the resources in the Amazon Fund to the *ruralistas* as compensation for loss of forest cover. The government used about R\$1.5 billion [US\$366 million] of the Amazon Fund to finance IBAMA's operations and firefighting, in addition to the use of that money to finance the corporations that are operating in the Amazon. This shift in the priorities of the Fund has alarmed the main donors, Norway and Germany. Due to the fires in the Amazon this year, the donors to the fund have suspended their contributions.
4. Undermining the Protection of the Land. The Bolsonaro government has almost encouraged the *ruralistas* to use illegal methods to grab land in the Amazon region. The level of violence against leaders of popular movements has increased. A culture of impunity towards violence is being inculcated (this is illustrated by the pardon given to the police officers who participated in massacres, such as the 17 April 1996 killing of 21 members of the Movement of Rural Landless Workers in Eldorado dos Carajás in Pará).

What Is Possible in the Amazon?

1. To guarantee the rights of the people who live in the rainforests over their own resources and their lives. To guarantee the rights of the indigenous people, the *quilombolas* (Afro-Brazilians who live rural communities, initially created by those who escaped from slavery), and the peasantry. They have the highest stakes in the preservation of the environment.
2. To defend national and popular sovereignty over natural resources against the interests of multinational corporations.
3. To create networks in Brazil and around the world to defend the people of the Amazon and the *Cerrado* (the tropical savannah).
4. To strengthen the ties between the people of the various countries that are in the Amazon region. These countries include Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Suriname, and Venezuela.



One of Brazil’s agencies in the Ministry of Environment that has oversight over the Amazon is called the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation (ICMBio). The name Chico Mendes is essential here. Mendes, a trade union leader and environmentalist, was shot to death on 22 December 1988 by the son of a rancher. The conspiracy to kill Mendes included the Rural Democratic Union — the ranchers’ organisation — and the local police. The ranchers wanted the land without regulations and the workers without a union. Bullets brought down Chico Mendes, but around him fire and chainsaws cut down his beloved Amazon. ‘At first, I thought I was fighting to save rubber trees’, Chico Mendes said before he died. ‘Then I thought that I was fighting to save the Amazon rainforest. Now I realise that I am fighting for humanity’. This sentiment is echoed now by Chief Raoni Metuktire.

In 1975, when the ranchers began to cut the forest with the full support of the military dictatorship, Chico Mendes taught his fellow rubber tappers about the *empate*. This *empate* was a human blockade. As the ranchers and the dictatorship brought their bulldozers and chainsaws to cut the forest, Chico and his fellow workers would form a cordon, blocking access to the Amazon's treasures. 'Don't be afraid', he would say to them, 'nothing is going to happen'. Bravely, they stood up to the madness and protected their forests.

We are in the age of madness again, on the edge of the destruction of the Amazon, an age that calls for the *empate*.

Warmly, Vijay.