



OPEN LETTER TO PRESIDENTS OF ARGENTINA, BRAZIL, BOLIVIA, COLOMBIA, ECUADOR, PARAGUAY, PERU: RECORD WILDFIRES IN THE AMAZON AND SOUTH AMERICA REQUIRE AN UNPRECEDENTED RESPONSE

August and September 2024 have seen record fires across South America, with several millions of hectares burning not only in rainforests of the Amazon basin, but also in diverse ecosystems stretching across entire countries. According to investigative media reports that cite data from Brazil's National Institute for Space Research (INPE), the period of wildfires has come earlier and more pronounced than previous years [on record](#), causing enormous emissions of carbon dioxide to be released into the atmosphere. The region is experiencing [one](#) of its most severe droughts in years according to data reported in press citing [governments of the region](#), added to the pressure caused by land [clearing](#) to make space for the expansion of industrial agriculture. Data reported from INPE [calculates](#) 50,000 wildfires in the Amazon basin in 2024 alone, and according to these figures at a regional level **Brazil** overwhelmingly leads the tally and [accounts](#) for 71.9% of the total wildfires, followed by **Bolivia** with 11.2%.

In **Argentina**, authorities have [reported](#) at least 91,540 hectares burned due to hundreds of wildfires so far in 2024. In **Brazil**, in September, [60%](#) of the country was covered in a layer of smoke generated by the fires and the [Climate Observatory](#) has estimated that over [11 million hectares](#) have burned since the start of 2024. Mato Grosso is currently the state with the most fires in the country, and the Federation of Indigenous Peoples and Organizations of Mato Grosso [reported](#) that more than half of the state's Indigenous lands have been affected. In **Bolivia**, authorities have [reported](#) to press at least four million hectares have burned, extending over a large part of the country, with a territorial impact proportionally much greater than that of the fires in Brazil, given Bolivia's smaller territorial extension. Bolivia's government [declared](#) a national emergency on 7 September, only after repeated calls from human rights observers and communities calling for an emergency since several weeks prior. In **Colombia**, authorities have [reported](#) that 19,439 hectares of native forest throughout the country have been lost in the month of September alone, and that in 2024 the country has [experienced](#) several hundreds of fires in 30 of its 32 departments, double the area compared to fires in 2023. In **Ecuador**, authorities have [reported](#) several hundreds of fires from 24 August to date, with over 34,800 hectares burnt. In **Paraguay**, authorities [report](#) that 318,604 hectares of forest cover have burned so far in September alone, especially in the Chaco region, with more than half of the burned area belonging to the Cerro Chovoreca reserve. In **Peru**, according to the National Emergency Operations Centre (COEN) and the [Ombudsperson's Office](#), forest fires have covered a very large area of territory with 22 of the country's 25 departments with active fires, and to date at least 18 people have died.

While several governments of the region have responded with emergency measures, the current crisis is symptomatic of entrenched failures on the part of authorities to implement structural measures to combat the climate crisis which has reached alarming proportions and threatens to generate irreversible consequences. Considering the above, Amnesty International calls to attention the following issues which are of urgent priority for countries of the region:

- a) **Immediately address the root causes of wildfires, phasing out fossil fuels, transforming the current model of industrial agriculture and ensuring strict legal consequences for illegitimate land use.**

Wildfires are not only caused, among other factors, by the warming of global temperatures, yet also contribute to the climate crisis by producing emissions that cross borders and continents, according to the World Meteorological Organization, who has signaled this ["vicious cycle"](#) is a losing game for everyone. Press reports point to several countries experiencing severe consequences for daily activities and critical air quality affecting the right to health of millions. Governments have had years to avoid these disastrous outcomes, yet on the contrary, many have persisted in pursuing retrogressive climate policies. The fact that burning fossil fuels is the primary cause of climate change has been [settled science](#) for decades. Despite commitments to limit global heating to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels made under the 2015 Paris Agreement and the recognition at COP28 that states must ["\[transition\] away from fossil fuels in energy systems, in a just, orderly and equitable manner"](#) – most states have [failed](#) to halt expansion and continue to license, permit and heavily subsidize the production and consumption of fossil fuels. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change ([IPCC has highlighted](#) that production from existing fossil fuel infrastructures is already estimated to exceed the remaining carbon budget for limiting warming to 1.5°C. Nevertheless, in **Argentina**, [the country's energy strategy](#) continues to pursue a marked overreliance on fossil fuels, permitting several new exploration permits for oil and gas projects. In the case of **Ecuador**, the government [continues](#) to allow gas flaring in the Amazon, despite a 2021 Court ruling that calls for these flares to be extinguished.

Not only are governments failing to phase out fossil fuels, but policies continue to favor largescale industrialized agriculture which [undermines ecological land use practices that could help reduce climate emissions](#) and seriously compromises [commitments made to halt the global decline in biodiversity](#) and strengthen the [rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) as well as those of local communities to exercise



sustainable and traditional land use practices. States must make a [just transition](#) from unsustainable and exploitative agriculture and food systems to sustainable and human rights-consistent agricultural and land management practices. In South America, governments are turning a blind eye to economic activities sustained by illegal land grabbing and deforestation, and several monitoring data and reports have shown that the areas most affected by wildfires overlap with maps of areas seized for largescale expansion of agroindustry. States have committed to halting deforestation under various international agreements, including the Convention on Biological Diversity, the SDGs (Goal 15), the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement.

Despite these international commitments, in **Bolivia**, although authorities committed to maintain forest cover, human rights defenders have cited their inaction to completely abolish laws that for years have favoured agro-industry and extractive industries which drive [deforestation](#). In **Argentina**, [the Largescale Investments Law \(RIGI\)](#) of June 2024 includes modifications to the investment regime to fiscally benefit activities that could include investment in forestry, mining, oil, and other extractive industries. The benefits do not include any type of environmental control or protection or penalties for environmental impacts. In **Peru**, Indigenous organisations have [expressed](#) their concern over the enactment of Law No. 29763, the Forestry and Wildlife Law, which earmarks the use of forest land for agricultural purposes.

b) Ensure the right to self-determination of Indigenous Peoples and security of tenure for traditional landowners as well as their full involvement in decision making processes.

Indigenous Peoples are frequently at the [frontline](#) of climate change impacts. They often maintain a close connection with the natural environment and their traditional lands on which their livelihoods and cultural identity depend. Indigenous Peoples have knowledge and experience of adapting to often dramatic changes in the natural environment of their territories and play a crucial role in the conservation of biodiversity, forests and natural resources. For example, recent [research](#) from Amazon basin countries suggests that Indigenous Peoples and traditional communities can play a significant role in keeping forests intact, thereby lowering carbon emissions from those areas. In this respect, article 26 of the [UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples](#) underscores the right of Indigenous Peoples to ownership, use and control of their lands, territories and resources and the obligation of States to give them legal recognition and protection to these lands.

Nevertheless, lack of security of tenure [affects the entire region](#) and increases the exposure of Indigenous Peoples, as well as local communities, and particularly the women among them, to the threat of violence, forced evictions and other human rights abuses as a consequence of illegal land seizure and land acquisition for a variety of purposes, including industrial agriculture, extractive industries, biofuels, trade in timber, cattle ranching and even hydroelectric dams. In **Brazil**, [data](#) reported publicly has shown that most of the public lands affected by wildfires in the Amazon between January and August 2024 were undesignated public lands without the protections from destructive land use that could come from traditional forms of ownership. That is, lands that have not yet been transformed into settlements, conservation areas or other protected territories, such as Indigenous lands and *quilombola* territories. In **Argentina**, Indigenous communities suffer [entrenched institutional failings](#) that perpetuate landlessness, violence and eviction from their territories. In **Bolivia**, Indigenous Peoples continue to face a lack of government protection of their land rights. In **Ecuador**, Executive Decree 754 remains in force, even though human rights organizations continued to express concern that it was not in line with international standards on the right to participation in environmental decision-making processes. In **Paraguay**, the National Plan for the Rights of Indigenous Peoples [continues](#) to lack adequate finance, which hinders its implementation. The [main concern](#) of the country's human rights organisations is the [impact](#) on indigenous communities, particularly on groups in voluntary isolation and their territories. For its part, in **Colombia**, the Constitutional Court issued a [ruling in 2023](#) protecting the right of Indigenous Peoples to prior consultation regarding the administrative configuration of their territories. United Nations experts have [warned](#) that a third of Indigenous Peoples in **Peru** are particularly vulnerable due to the lack of legal title for their territories, especially those in isolation and initial contact.

c) Urgently protect environmental human rights defenders from attacks, harassment and killings.

States are [failing](#) to protect, and in some cases are even targeting climate justice activists and environmental human rights defenders opposing the production and use of fossil fuels, with the aim of stopping them from protecting vital natural resources and a stable climate, especially when their activities clash with states' or corporations' economic interests. Despite being the first regional environmental agreement of Latin America and the Caribbean and the first in the world containing specific provisions on environmental human rights defenders, six years on from its adoption, the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America ([Escazú Agreement](#)) still has not been ratified by **Brazil, Paraguay and Peru**. For their part, international organizations such as [Global Witness](#) have repeatedly declared Latin America the most deadly region in the world for land, territory and environmental defenders. Despite this, several countries in the region lack comprehensive protection policies and mechanisms



for those defenders and communities carrying out vital work to protect the environment from degradation.

d) Take bold and immediate action to combat deforestation and extinguish wildfires.

In the face of catastrophic wildfires in the region, some governments have taken action to tackle the burning of forests, yet much more must be done. In **Brazil**, deforestation [decreased](#) in 2023 to the lowest rate in the last five years, yet the daily rates of land clearing are still alarming and legal amendments could risk weakening environmental protections. In **Bolivia**, in recent days lawmakers have taken some steps to begin to abolish a series of laws known as 'incendiary laws' that allowed logging and land clearing, but many other permissive laws remain intact and have not been fully repealed. For their part, other governments have not only failed to act adequately to stop wildfires but continue to employ regressive measures that exacerbate the risk of fires. For example, in **Argentina**, authorities carried out [a drastic cut](#) to the environmental budget for 2024. Later, [a presidential decree](#) had the effect of dismissing numerous workers in the National Parks' service, which risks half the staff by December 2024, including personnel to combat fires. In **Peru**, media reported in mid-September that [the country's premier stated](#) there were not sufficient grounds to implement emergency measures in relation to wildfires, nor request international assistance, despite the fact that several local governments in the country had called for emergency measures for weeks. At the time of writing, despite taking belated measures in some regions, the Peruvian cabinet was still considering the possibility of taking special measures at the national level on the fires, even though almost the entire country has fires burning.

In this respect, governments of South America must [urgently adopt](#) and implement forest and other natural ecosystems conservation laws and policies. Such laws and policies must ensure that [abusive conservation practices](#), such as the militarized exclusion of Indigenous Peoples as well as local communities, and criminalization of land and environment defenders, are prohibited, and should be developed with the full and meaningful participation of all affected people. In addition, governments must ramp up efforts to extinguish the current wildfires in the region, deploying maximum use of their resources to ensure a rapid response to avoid more burning and toxic emissions and requesting international assistance where necessary. Finally, authorities should implement policies and protocols to address wildfires and the effects of the climate crisis, including protection and mitigation in health, housing, food and water security. Authorities should already be informing, orienting and distributing personal and environmental protection equipment to affected populations.

In the coming months, South American countries will host key multilateral decision-making conferences for the planet, starting with COP16 on the Convention on Biological Diversity in Colombia in October 2024, and in 2025 world leaders will meet in Brazil's Belem Para in the Amazon region for COP30 of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. The world is watching and cannot wait for the Amazon basin and other precious ecosystems in the continent to be saved from extinction. South American leaders must, more than ever, take urgent action to prevent climate catastrophe that could have irreversible consequences for humanity and for the planet. The time to act is now.