

The Amazon fires

BY GWYNNE DYER

The Amazon is not on fire. There are fires in the Amazon rainforest, as there are every year in July-September, because this is the dry season. There may be more fires than usual this year, and it may even be the fault of Jair Bolsonaro, the Trump mini-me who became the president of Brazil last January, but that is not clear.

Yet there now is a great outcry, with French president Emmanuel Macron saying that Bolsonaro lied to him about his stance on climate change. Macron is even threatening to withhold French ratification of the recently signed free trade agreement between the European Union and Mercosur (of which Brazil is the biggest member).

British prime minister Bori Johnson declares that it is 'an international crisis', and Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel calls the fires 'an acute emergency ... for the whole world.' The Finnish foreign minister even suggests that the European Union should boycott Brazilian beef. Concerted international action at last!

Well, no. They might have done it at the G7 summit of the world's richest countries last weekend in Biarritz, but they all knew it would just prompt another Donald Trump walkout like last year's. And some of their advisers may be warning them by now that they are not on very safe ground when they paint Bolsonaro as the sole culprit of the piece.

Bolsonaro is not a good person. He is an obtuse and obnoxious bully who doesn't give a fig about the climate and advocates 'developing' the Amazon in ways that would ultimately destroy the rainforest.

When environmental activists claimed that farmers encouraged by Bolsonaro's incendiary rhetoric were setting fires to clear Amazonian land for ranching, he blamed the activists themselves, saying that they were setting the fires to discredit him. He had no evidence, he admitted, but he had a 'feeling' about it.

Of course Brazilian farmers and the agribusiness interests behind them are setting fires to destroy bits of the forest, but this is not new with Bolsonaro. The amount of forest they destroyed annually went into steady decline after the Workers' Party (PT) took power in 2003, but the damage has been trending back up again since the last PT president, Dilma Rousseff, was impeached by Congress (on spurious charges) in 2015.

Bolsonaro is definitely the icing on the cake, but it's questionable how much impact he has had after less than eight months in power. The number of fines handed out for illegal burning has dropped by a third this year, but the great majority of illegal burns always went unpunished anyway.

When Brazil's National Space Research Institute reported an 88% increase in deforestation in June compared with the same month a year ago, nobody except Bolsonaro questioned the data. But that was before this year's burning season (Queimada) began, and presumably referred to losses of forest due to illegal logging and land-clearing for mining operations, not to fires.

When the same Brazilian space institute claimed more recently that satellite data showed an 83% increase this year in forest fires, mainly in the Amazon region, Bolsonaro promptly fired its director, claiming that he was manipulating the data for political reasons.

Bolsonaro's relationship with the truth is as distant as Trump's, but it must be pointed out that NASA's Earth Observatory, also relying on satellite data, reported on August 22 that 'total fire activity across the Amazon basin this year has been close to the average in comparison to the past 15 years.'

There is, to be sure, a pall of smoke hanging over Sao Paulo, Brazil's biggest city, at the moment. It's as bad as Singapore six years ago or Vancouver last summer, and there's no doubt that it comes from forest fires. They are, however, fires in the Bolivian part of

the Amazon, not Brazil's.

What the hell, you may say. Bolsonaro may not be guilty this time, but he's guilty of lots of other things, so let's hang him anyway. This is not a wise way of proceeding, even if you are doing it with the best of intentions.

The data about the climate crisis are always complicated and open to dispute, because the planet is a very complex system.

Those who claim to understand enough about it to offer policy advice must be above suspicion, and to go along with the assertion that 'the Amazon is on fire' and that it's all Bolsonaro's fault is neither prudent or provable.

Although I must admit that it's very tempting.