

In securing Amazon, Brazil must balance development and sustainability

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In one of several military operations that have been launched over the past year to tackle illegal gold mining, illegal deforestation and drug smuggling in the Amazon rain forest, Brazil is sending more than 8,500 troops to patrol an area that stretches across the northern border of the country.

The deployment, which underscores Brazil's efforts to assert greater control over the more than two-thirds of the Amazon that falls within its borders, comes as international expectations over Brazil's role as a regional power rise -- and as a United Nations conference on sustainable development to be held in Rio de Janeiro nears.

"Leading up to the Rio+20 conference, the Brazilian government wants to show that it is doing something to bring some control to the environmental destruction that is so rampant in the Amazon," Scott Wallace, a National Geographic contributor, expert on Brazil and author of "The Unconquered: In Search of the Amazon's Last Uncontacted Tribes," told Trend Lines. "Brazil is beginning to recognize that, as it emerges as a major player, it really does need to bring more law and order to the vast stretches of the Amazon that are largely lawless."

While the military operation is focused on the borders with neighboring countries Suriname, Venezuela, Guyana and French Guiana, Wallace said the organized criminal activities these troops are meant to tackle also pose security risks and environmental hazards deep within the Brazilian Amazon territory.

"Brazil is enormous, and the Amazon is enormous, and these frontier areas are huge and very difficult to control and patrol," he said. "The latest deployment is toward the northern boundary areas, which are very remote and lawless, and where security is very much lacking."

In a region where sovereignty is a sensitive issue, Brazil said it has informed its neighbors of the nature of these operations, in order to reassure them. There have also been steps toward regional coordination of security efforts, Wallace said, describing agreements made between Brazil, Colombia and Peru.

"In the borders they share, there is a nexus of illegal activity going on surrounding the production and transport of illegal drugs as well as timber, and those three countries have been working more closely together to bring some kind of control to that border area," he said. "What Brazil seems to be doing in the northern border areas now is pretty much a unilateral action, but they have been in touch with their counterparts in other countries to explain that this in no way is a threat to them, that they are simply trying to bring control to their border region."

Beyond the external pressures of the international community, there are also internal pressures that have led Brazil to step up its security efforts.

"Brazil has become a major trafficking route for drugs on their way to Europe, and a lot of this illegal contraband is now finding its way into Brazilian markets," Wallace said.

Meanwhile, illegal gold mining in the forest is not only hugely destructive to the environment, but also a real threat to indigenous populations, such as the Yanomami people who live on the border between Venezuela and Brazil. Wallace explained that these populations are very susceptible to diseases carried by outsiders and that the government has an obligation to "protect them from the predation of uncontrolled frontier expansion."

But he said Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff has "hitched her wagon to these megadevelopment projects as the model the government is going to follow."

And over the next several days, Wallace continued, her government's commitment to

balancing economic expansion and environmental conservation will be tested in how she handles a controversial land use law.

"In tandem with these large megadevelopment projects, you also have moves within the congress to alter the forest code to essentially grant an amnesty to those who have been involved in illegal clearing of rainforests for cattle ranching or grain production," he said. "She is going to have to decide in the next few days whether to veto or to sign that bill, which congress passed into law, or whether she will selectively veto certain aspects of it and keep others."

Wallace said that questions remain over how effective these military operations will be, whether regional coordination will lead to the lasting commitment needed to bring security to the region and how Brazil will balance its economic and environmental interests.

"Brazil is in the process of rapid economic expansion. The most obvious place to look for the energy that Brazil thinks it needs to carry out this economic expansion is in the Amazon," he said.

Wallace explained that Brazil is leading the charge of nations building dams to tap the hydroelectric power of the Amazon basin, adding, "There does not seem to be a great deal of thought as to finding an alternative model to develop the Amazon in a way that does not destroy it."

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