

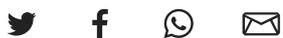
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Amazon fire season could be catastrophic for Brazil's Covid-19 response, charity warns

'The health system is already stretched to the maximum. And in some cases collapsed,' experts have warned

By Jordan Kelly-Linden

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Every year fires roar across the Amazon, but with the added burden of Covid-19, experts now worry that Brazil's already floundering healthcare system may not be able to cope.

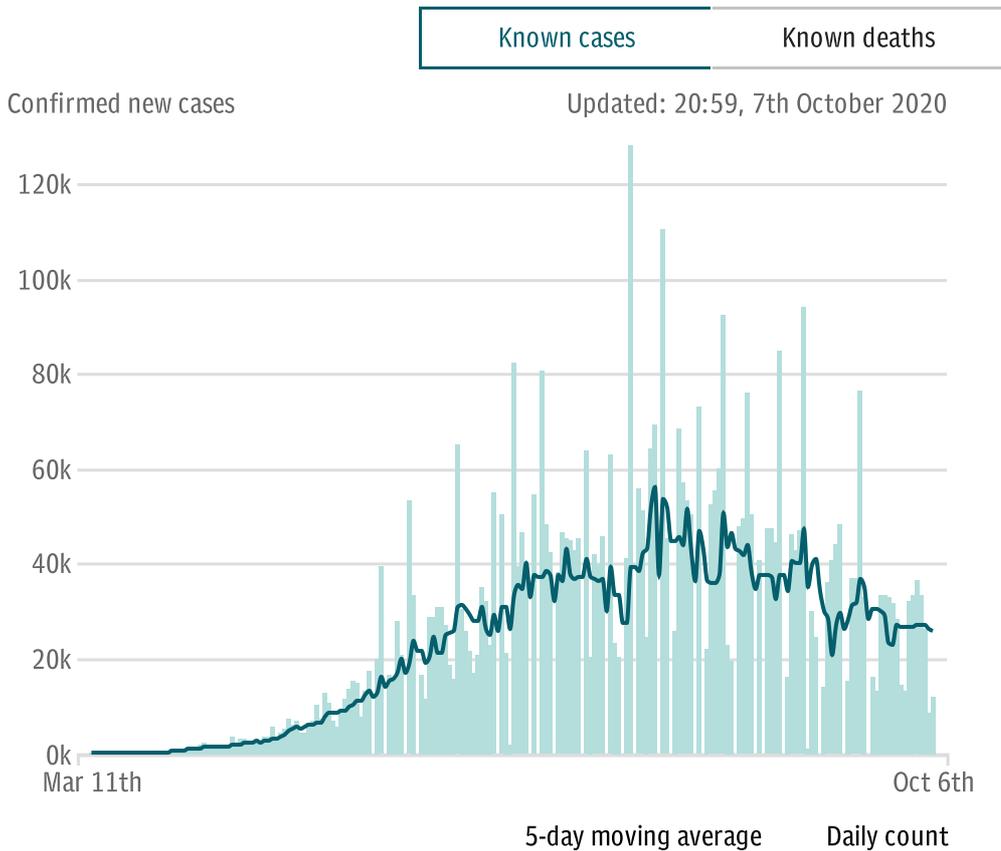
Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has warned that a surge in incidents of respiratory problems triggered by thick clouds of ash and smoke may soon overwhelm hospitals in northwestern states, many of which are already struggling with the coronavirus pandemic.

“We know already from the fires that occurred in the previous years that it produces toxic smoke,” Dounia Dekhili, MSF Brazil’s head of mission told a press conference yesterday. “We can only be worried because it is adding one more issue and one more potential disease to the already existing complicated situation.”

The total number of cases in Brazil has now exceeded 1.5 million with more than 60,000 people thought to have died. [The country of 209.5 million is now at the epicentre of the coronavirus outbreak in South America](#) and second only to the United States as the worst hit region of the world.

While testing is taking place, MSF said that the official numbers may only represent a true fraction of the total cases, due to the Government’s shambolic handling of the pandemic.

Brazil | ▲ Up*



* Today's 7-day average compared to yesterday's 7-day average



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Brazil's far-right president Jair Bolsonaro has been repeatedly accused of hobbling the country's public health response by playing down the dangers of the virus, replacing medical experts in the health ministry with military officials and arguing against state lockdowns to fight the virus.

The fragmentation of the response between the central federal government and local state administrations is exacerbating the situation, MSF says.

"Not enough is being done to stop the spread. And the virus is still spreading to the most vulnerable communities," Ms Dekhili said. "These are people in the interior, in the north, and in the urban slums. The messages they are getting from the central government are not of reassurance, guidance or even caution. This is not normal, and has terrible consequences."

MSF, which has a total of six emergency response projects dotted across the country, warned that the fall-out from the country's fire season will only exacerbate [the already dire health situation](#).

June marked the start of Brazil's dry period with a total of 2,248 fires already recorded across the Amazon states in that month alone. But not all the fires are from natural causes, says Greenpeace.

"These fires are no accident," says Anna Jones, Head of Forests at Greenpeace. "Brazil's President, Jair Bolsonaro, has done nothing to discourage ranchers and land grabbers to stop deforesting the Amazon. Despite the Covid-19 pandemic, deforestation has soared and now we are seeing fires deliberately lit to clear that land for agriculture."

[Rainforest fires in previous years](#) have sent smoke hundreds of miles away, worsening air quality over major cities and resulting in thousands of people fleeing the flames.

"This is just the beginning," warns Ms Jones. "Over the next few months, unless we see strong intervention, fires will be likely to increase and engulf vast areas of forest, endangering the lives of Indigenous Peoples, wildlife and worsening the climate crisis globally."



The biggest worry for MSF Brazil is that forced migration from the fires may only hasten the spread of the virus within the most vulnerable communities and overwhelm already stretched medical centres, as the number of respiratory problems in urban areas surge.

“The forced movement of people created by the fires in many situations is also a factor of worrying,” Ana de Lemos, Executive Director of MSF Brazil, warned, noting the risk it may pose to indigenous groups who will be forced out of isolation as a result.

“We can only be worried as the health system is already stretched to the maximum. And in some cases collapsed,” agreed Ms Dekhili.

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