Top Amazon Deforestation Satellite Researcher Sacked by Bolsonaro

By Jenny Gonzales
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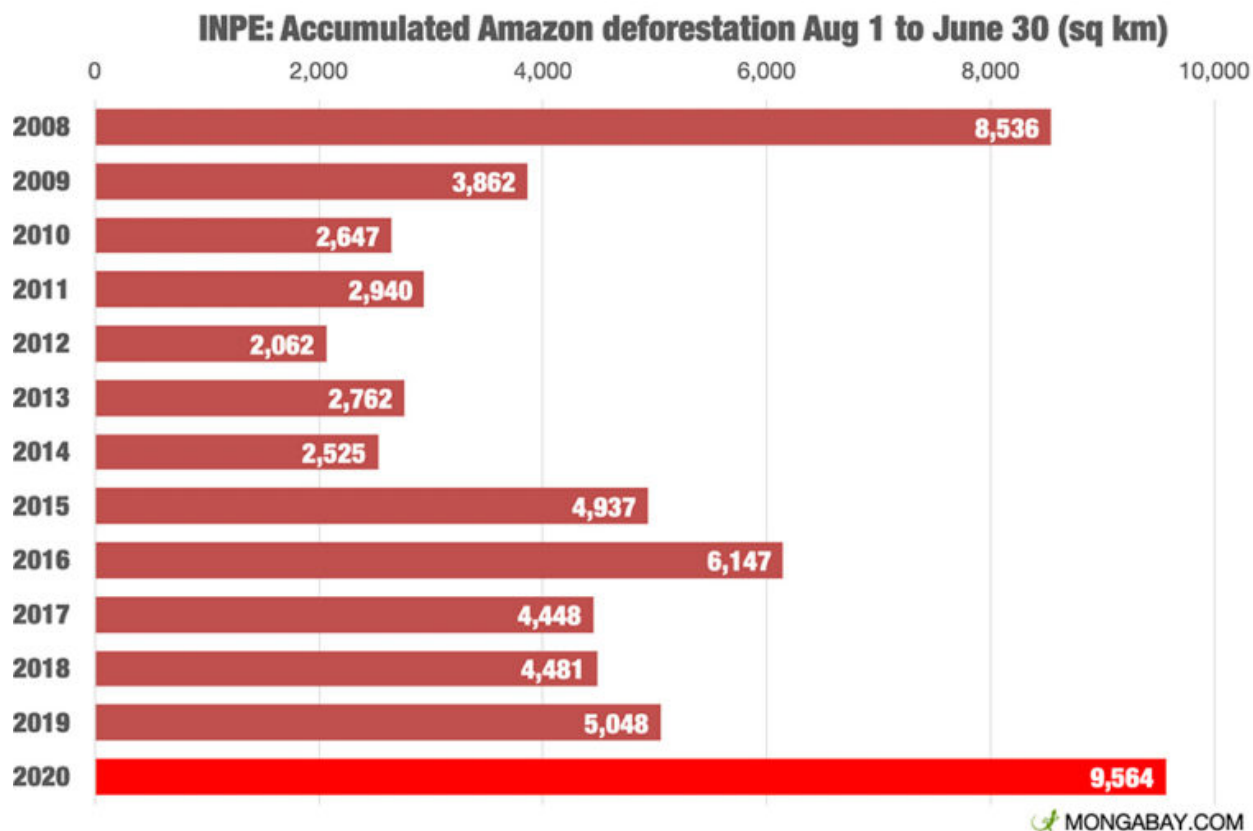Region: Latin America & Caribbean
Theme: Environment, Intelligence, Law and Justice

Just days after the publication of data showing that deforestation in the Brazilian Amazon has reached destructive levels not seen since the mid-2000s, the administration of President Jair Bolsonaro sacked the top scientist responsible for tracking and analyzing the data.

National Institute of Space Research (INPE) researcher Lubia Vinhas, the general coordinator for INPE's Earth Observation Agency (CGOBT) was dismissed Monday. Vinhas was responsible for overseeing the missions of the DETER and PRODES satellite systems that measure the nation's monthly and annual deforestation respectively — both pathfinding systems long hailed as the gold standard for deforestation monitoring.

INPE's satellite-based deforestation alert system detected 1,034 square kilometers of forest clearing during June 2020, bringing the twelve-month total to 9,564 square kilometers, 89% higher than just a year ago. The extent of deforestation over the past year is the highest recorded since INPE started releasing monthly numbers in 2007.

June 2020 represents the 15th consecutive month of increasing forest loss; Bolsonaro took office in January 2019, roughly 18 months ago. According to DETER, which gathers daily deforestation alerts through satellite images, deforestation grew by 25% from January to June 2020 compared to the same period in 2019.

INPE: Accumulated Amazon deforestation Aug 1 to June 30 (sq km)

Year	sq km
2008	8,536
2009	3,862
2010	2,647
2011	2,940
2012	2,062
2013	2,762
2014	2,525
2015	4,937
2016	6,147
2017	4,448
2018	4,481
2019	5,048
2020	9,564

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Word of Vinhas' dismissal was published in the Official Gazette of the Union (DOU) and signed by the Minister of Science and Technology Marcos Pontes. No justification was given for the removal.

Contacted by Mongabay on Monday, the Ministry of Science press office sent an email response concerning the sacking:

> "The Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovations (MCTI) clarifies that the dismissal of Dr. Lubia Vinhas published in the Official Gazette of the Union is part of her reallocation from the position of General Coordinator of the CGOBT to the position of Chief of the Strategic Project Division, to be created as part of the restructuring of the National Institute for Space Research (INPE)....

> "The INPE restructuring, which will be announced at a press conference [today] at the MCTI headquarters, aims to seek synergies and optimize the institute's human and infrastructure resources for a more efficient functioning. Dr. Lubia Vinhas has participated in this process and is in agreement with the changes, which were foreseen and have no relation to the production and dissemination of deforestation data, which will continue to follow the same procedures with quality and transparency."

Lubia Vinhas, PhD in applied computing (far left), who was removed from her general coordinator position at INPE Monday. She stands alongside Ricardo Galvão, former INPE director, fired last year by the Bolsonaro government. Image courtesy of INPE.
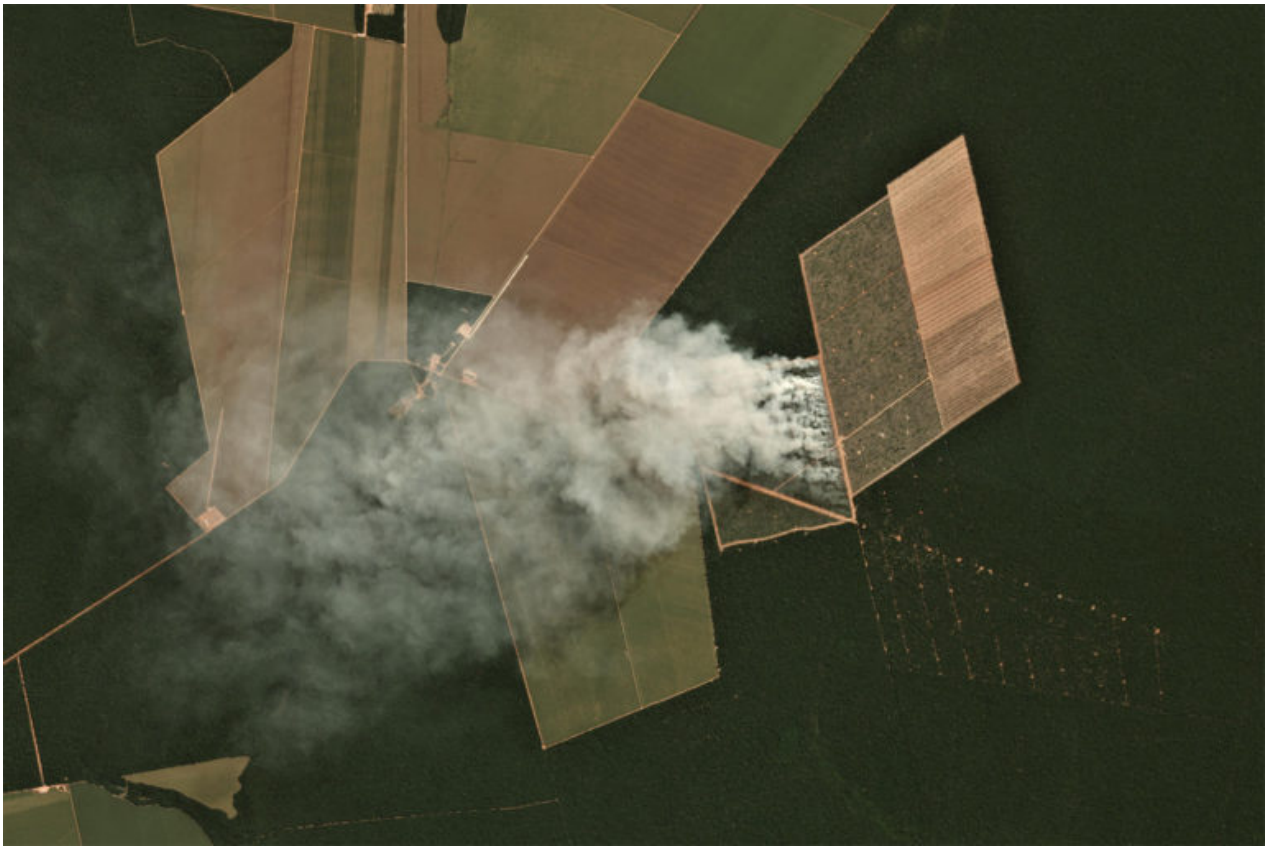
Yesterday, Vinhas told the *O Estado de S.Paulo* newspaper that she only learned of her dismissal when she read the DOU and that it would be up to INPE Director Darcton Policarpo Damião to explain the reason.

Later that same day, the former coordinator seemed to have gained new information, saying that

> "I believe that my departure [as general coordinator] is directly related to the restructuring process of INPE that has been proposed by the current management, and not in direct response to figures related to monitoring."

Marcio Astrini, executive secretary of the Climate Observatory — a network formed in 2002, composed of 50 non-governmental organizations and social movements — questioned the Science ministry's response:

> "The justification that the government brings does not make sense, because the CGOBT general coordinator was removed from her role with the promise of taking over a department that does not even exist. Her withdrawal causes a problem with no plausible explanation, since, at a critical moment in the Amazon, when fires are starting and deforestation numbers are being finalized, she would be removed from [her position] and going nowhere."

Planet image showing fire on recently deforested land near Itaúba in the State of Mato Grosso, Brazil on June 29, 2020. Fire identified by MAAP. Image courtesy of Planet.

Indeed, Vinhas' removal after the release of Amazon deforestation statistics upsetting to the administration does have precedent. It was just last year that Bolsonaro questioned the reliability of INPE's data which similarly reflected a rapidly rising Amazon deforestation rate. He even voiced suspicion that Ricardo Galvão, then director of the institute, was manipulating the data in "the service of some NGOs." Bolsonaro and Ricardo Salles, Minister of the Environment, also went so far as to say that the INPE data were false. Shortly after, in August 2019, Bolsonaro fired Galvão.

Suely Araújo, former president of IBAMA, Brazil's environmental agency, and a senior public policy specialist at the Climate Observatory, responded critically to the firing of Vinhas, telling Mongabay that "Changes in the INPE team during a period of… intensification of [DETER] analysis is very worrying. In this critical phase, changes in coordination tend to lead to demobilization in work and less transparency. If that is the intention, the [Bolsonaro] government will not be successful. Research institutes and civil society organizations will monitor what is happening in terms of [Amazon] deforestation and fires and demand the necessary measures." Annual deforestation data for the PRODES system is still scheduled to be released in November.

Araújo is especially concerned that the dismissal comes as the Amazon fire season is beginning, a critical period for monthly satellite monitoring. The Administration last week decreed a 120-day ban on fires in the Amazon and has already deployed the army to the region to try to rein in burning. But fires are already well underway despite it being early in the dry season, according to analysis of satellite data by Amazon Conservation's MAAP project.

Brazilian Amazon deforestation is occurring at the highest rate since 2007. Image by Fábio Nascimento / Mongabay.

Araújo concluded:

> "INPE is an organization with highly specialized and internationally respected technicians. I sincerely hope that the government knows this and does not intend to restructure the institute."

Astrini is also concerned that the news of Vinhas' dismissal could be an indicator of Bolsonaro's future plans for INPE.

> "It is no secret that since last year the government has desired to intervene in INPE. Ricardo Galvão's noisy resignation prevented this, but the dismissal of Lubia Vinhas may be an indication that the plan was never abandoned," Astrini said. "That this happens in [the midst of the] full acceleration of deforestation, when the government needs to contain threats of [economic] disinvestments, is a sign that Bolsonaro seems to be addressing the concerns of agribusiness and investors as he addresses the concerns of Brazilians terrified by the Coronavirus."

At present, Bolsonaro is enduring intensifying pressure from major international and Brazilian businesses and investors who are threatening action if Brazil doesn't curb deforestation, along with warnings from European Union nations who say they may not ratify the $19 trillion dollar EU-Mercusor trade agreement unless Brazil improves its record on the environment, especially Amazon deforestation and climate change.

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Featured image: Besides large-scale farming and logging, many Amazonian rainforests are being slowly fragmented for rural electrification and other activities

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