Worrisome Amazon fires

Why in News?

- Over the last several days, the Amazon rainforest has been burning at a rate that has alarmed environmentalists and governments worldwide.
- Mostly caused by farmers clearing land, the fires have thrown the spotlight on Brazil President's policies and anti-environment stance.
- To know more, click here.

Where are the Amazon fires happening?

- The fires started in the Amazonian rainforests and have impacted populated areas in the north such as Rondônia, blocking sunlight and enveloping the region in smoke.
- The smoke has wafted thousands of miles to the Atlantic coast and São Paulo, according to the World Meteorological Organization (WMO).
- The forest fires in the region have doubled since 2013, and increased by 84% compared to the same period last year, according to Brazil's National Institute for Space Research (INPE).
- This year alone there have been 72,843 fires and more than 9,500 of those have happened over the past few days.

How did the Amazon fires start?

- Brazil President Jair Bolsonaro's anti-environment rhetoric has encouraged farmers, who in turn organised a fire day along BR-163, a highway that runs through the heart of the rainforest.
- A local newspaper there reported that the local farmers had set fire to the section of rainforest a few days ago to get the government's attention.
- An INPE researcher told that this year, the region did not experience extreme dry weather.
- This point is significant because the dry season creates the favourable conditions for the use and spread of fire, but starting a fire is the work of humans, either deliberately or by accident.
- The Amazon fires are so large that they are visible from space. NASA released images showing the spread of fires and reported that its satellites had detected heightened fire activity in July and August.

Why the Amazon fires are a cause for concern?

- The Amazon rainforest is a **repository of rich biodiversity** and produces approximately 20% of oxygen in the Earth's atmosphere.
- It is **home to indigenous communities** whose lives and homelands are under threat due to encroachment by the Brazil government, foreign corporations, local farmers, etc.
- In a 2017 study, the University of Leeds found that carbon intake by the Amazon basin matches the emissions released by nations in the basin.
- The burning of forests implies additional carbon emissions. Further deforestation could transform Amazon to a savanna, which would reverse the region's ecology.
- A National Geographic report said the Amazon rainforest influences the water cycle not only on a regional scale, but also on a global scale.
- The report said the Amazon rainforest has the ability to produce at least half of the rain it receives. This cycle is a delicate balance.

What environmental protection do Brazil's laws provide, and what has changed recently?

- **In 1965** - Under Brazil's Forest Code of 1965, farmers could purchase Amazon land but could farm only 20% of it.
- **In 1988** - Following the collapse of the 1988 military dictatorship, a new constitution gave indigenous populations legal ownership of their land and the right to reject the development of their land.
- **In 2012** - Forest Code was revised to reduce the area of deforested land required to be restored, and to reduce penalties for illegal deforesting.
- **In 2018** - Brazil's Supreme Court upheld these changes.
- **In 2019** - Bolsonaro took office in January, promised during his election campaign that he would open up the Amazon region for business.
- Along with aggressive policies of promoting agribusiness, Bolsonaro has opposed protections for indigenous tribal land.
- Agribusiness products in 2016 represented 46% of Brazil's exports.
- Conservationists believe that for Brazil's government, short-term economic interests take precedence over environmental concerns.

How has the government reacted to the concerns over the fires?

- Bolsonaro has dismissed the INPE findings and said it was the time of the year when farmers burn the land for farming.
- In July, he fired INPE scientist Ricardo Galvao for publishing agency data that showed the accelerated rate of deforestation, calling the figures a lie and the images manipulated.

- Bolsonaro said that a report that does not match the truth can cause great damage to the image of Brazil. INPE has defended its data.

How has the international community reacted?

- Germany and Norway have suspended funding for programmes that aim to stop deforestation in the Amazon.
- They also accused Brazil of doing little to protect the forests.
- Indigenous groups and environmental activists have led protests and criticised Bolsonaro for his comments and policies.

Source: The Indian Express

