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**Brazil recovery accelerates Amazon destruction**

By Raymond Colitt in Sao Paulo  
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Brazil's economic recovery and agricultural export boom last year have accelerated the destruction of the Amazon rainforest to its fastest rate in a decade.

In the 12 months through August last year an estimated 26,130 square kilometres of forest were destroyed, an area roughly three times the size of the US state Connecticut, according to this week's ministry of environment data.

That is a 6 per cent increase over the previous period and the second-highest rate since measurements began in 1988.

The latest results are likely to again focus international attention on the Brazilian government's efforts to curb the destruction of the world's largest source of fresh-water, carbon absorption and bio-diversity.

The government, which had been expecting rates similar to those of 2003, was surprised by the figures, which are based on satellite photographs. Marina Silva, environment minister, in an interview last week, said she hoped to claim "we at least stabilised the deforestation rate in spite of faster economic growth." That did not happen.

Most environmental experts in Brazil agree economic growth, new roads, and expanding agriculture are the main culprits. "Agriculture pushed the frontier, in part directly but mostly by driving cattle ranchers and small-scale farmers deeper into the forest," said Marcio Santilli, co-ordinator with the Institute for Social and Environmental Studies. He says high soybean prices in 2004 were an incentive.

Nearly half of the destruction occurred in the western state of Mato Grosso, the country's main agricultural frontier. Critics say deforestation there increased since Blairo Maggi, one of the largest soybean producers in the world, became governor in 2002.

Greenpeace says only a third of the clearings in Mato Grosso were legal.

"Farmers have the right to legally deforest part of their land," said José Carlos Dias, Mato Grosso communications secretary. "If there was illegal deforestation, that is not our responsibility but the federal government's."

Many environmental groups agree that Ms Silva, who grew up in the jungle as a rubber-tapper, is motivated and, in principle, has designed sensible policies to combat deforestation.

These include hiring more forest patrols, increasing protected areas, supporting forest-based economic activities, and sorting out chaotic land ownership.

"We've done a lot in two years, there results don't come overnight," Ms Silva said.

But critics say a shortage of resources, corruption, red tape and political opposition hamper their implementation.

"This plan and control approach will always run into loopholes and opposition," said Roberto Smeraldi, head of Friends of the Earth in Sao Paulo.

"We need to get market forces on our side."

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Among other proposals Mr Smeraldi advocates taxes on timber, as well as funding for forestry products and services, from eco-tourism to natural cosmetics.

"We need to support the forest the way we did agriculture over the past two decades."

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