

## Analysis

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## 'Day of Fire': Blazes ignite suspicion in Amazon town

A maverick journalist in this isolated Brazilian ranching town warned his readers last month that the surrounding Amazon was about to go up in flames. Queimadas, or burnings, are nothing new in Novo Progresso, located on the frontier where Brazil's farmland edges the Amazon rainforest in the northern state of Para. Locals say farmers annually use fire to illegally clear pastures or newly deforested areas. But the Aug 5 article in the online Folha do Progresso was eerily specific about an upcoming "Day of Fire."

It said growers and ranchers were planning to set a coordinated series of fires in the forest and nearby land on Saturday, Aug 10, inspired in part by President Jair Bolsonaro. Brazil's right-wing leader has vowed to open the world's largest rainforest to more development. Punishment of environmental crimes has plummeted on his watch. When the day came, the number of fires tripled from the prior 24 hours. Government data recorded 124 blazes, compared to just six on Aug 10 last year.

Bolsonaro's office did not respond to a request for comment. In an Aug. 25 message on Twitter, Environment Minister Ricardo Salles said Bolsonaro had ordered a "rigorous" probe to "investigate and punish those responsible" for the Novo Progresso fires. State and federal police have since descended on this rough-edged town of 30,000. Some residents are not pleased with the sudden attention. Most farmers approached by Reuters declined to be interviewed. Many dismissed the Folha do Progresso story as rubbish, the invention of a fabulist. "For you outsiders, we're all criminals here," one rancher said, declining to give his name. Adecio Piran, the reporter who wrote the article, told Reuters he temporarily went into hiding after receiving death threats. He stands by his story. According to prosecutors investigating the case, Brazil's government did not move aggressively to prevent the conflagration, despite forewarning. Prosecutor Paulo Oliveira said he notified Brazil's environmental agency, Ibama, about the Folha do Progresso article on Aug. 7. The agency responded on Aug. 12, two days after the "Day of Fire," saying it lacked the police support needed to investigate the matter, according to copies of the correspondence between Ibama and Oliveira reviewed by Reuters.

Army troops were dispatched to the area weeks later. By last Wednesday, there were about 200 soldiers camping on a dusty patch of land used for country fairs on the edge of town. As Reuters drove the long road into town on Aug. 30, smoke still hung heavy in parts. Charred tree trunks and ash littered the ground where jungle recently stood. Brazil's Environment Ministry declined to comment for this story. Salles, the minister, has said previously that overly restrictive environmental policies have incited rural dwellers to resort to illegal logging and mining to make a living. The "Day of Fire" is part of a brutal wave of destruction in Brazil's rainforest this year. Some 6,404.8 sq km have been despoiled, double the area felled at this point last year and larger than the U.S. state of Delaware. Images of the Amazon burning have sparked international condemnation of the environmental policies of Bolsonaro, who has dismissed those concerns as outsiders meddling in Brazil's internal affairs. Townspeople in Novo Progresso bristled with resentment at the arrival of federal police and the military. Cattle traders complained it was bad for business.

Madalena Hoffmann, a former mayor of Novo Progresso, said she did not know if the Aug. 10 fires were intentionally coordinated. She said deforestation has gone too far. But like many here, she blames the government for imposing environmental rules so complicated and strict that farmers feel they must break the law to ply their trade. "Fundamentally it's the government's fault," she said.

### 'Abandoned'

Novo Progresso dates to the early 1980s, when Brazil's military dictatorship lured families here with the promise of land and opportunity. The armed forces, where former Army captain Bolsonaro got his start, viewed the largely uninhabited Amazon as a vast, resource-rich asset vulnerable to invasion or exploitation by foreigners. The military built roads and encouraged settlement. But by 1985, the dictatorship had fallen. The newly democratic government began what would become a very different policy towards the Amazon: Conservation.

"We were abandoned," said Moises Berta, a 59-year-old rancher. Sipping coffee under a dawn sky at a bakery popular with farmers, he said he moved to Novo Progresso as a young man in 1981 with hopes of starting a successful farm. Berta said the government has left him and others in the lurch by failing to grant clear titles to lands they have worked for years. Possessing the title to one's farm makes it easier to obtain financing and eventually sell it. Without it, ownership is difficult to prove, making illegal activity such as cutting down forest easier to get away with.

In Brazil, land ownership can be granted by demonstrating the property is being used constructively, is not owned by someone else, and is not located in a protected area - standards Berta says his holdings meet. But 38 years after arriving, Berta still does not have the title for his ranch beside highway BR 163, a vital artery for transporting soy and cattle, despite repeatedly trying to register it with the federal government. He might not have the rights to his land, but holding up his phone, Berta showed a document pertaining to four open cases against him from Ibama, the environmental watchdog. Asked what laws he had allegedly violated, he grinned. —Reuters

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This photo taken on Aug 27, 2019 shows an aerial view of a rough road connecting Mali's capital Bamako with the western city of Kayes. —AFP

## Bumpy ride as protests persist over Mali roads

Like many of his fellow Malians, Ousmane Maiga used to drive regularly between Gao, in the north of the country, and the capital Bamako. Today, he balks at doing the once-familiar trip. For one thing, there is the threat from militants - and then there is the state of the roads, which are catastrophically bad. The 1,200-km journey, which in the past would take around 24 hours, now takes "at least five days", he told AFP. "The road is so damaged that most people have to go via Burkina Faso and Niger, where they have to pay extra taxes."

The activist belongs to one of around 60 civil society groups in Gao, which yesterday were scheduled to stage protests demanding action to tackle Mali's roads problem. Africa's eighth-largest country has a mere

21,681 km of roads - and of these, just 7,156 km are tarred. In the vast northern region - twice the size of Sweden - one of the only tarred highways is the RN16 linking Gao to the central town of Sevare. "It's an obstacle course," Maiga, 43, said. "The top speed is 40 kph...and there's the dust, the heat and now the insecurity."

Northern Mali fell into the hands of jihadists in 2012 before the militants were forced out by a French-led military intervention. But much of the region remains chronically unstable and since 2015 violence has spread to the center of the country, an ethnic mosaic. Several construction projects launched in recent years with the help of international funding had to be temporarily suspended due to security threats, particularly in the country's north and center.

### Angry residents protest

Apart from the constant threat of jihadists and armed militias, Mali's infrastructure has also suffered from bad weather, a lack of state services and alleged widespread corruption. At the other end of the country, demonstrators in the southern city of Kayes won a symbolic victory in late August after blocking thousands of trucks from transporting their merchandise across the main bridge into neighboring Senegal.

The protests, which spread to other parts including Bamako, interrupted a key part of Mali's trade and prompted Prime Minister Boubou Cisse to visit the region. After driving along Kayes's dilapidated roads, the premier - in power since April - vowed his government

would release emergency funds worth A7.5 million (\$8.2 million) and restart construction works on the Kayes-Bamako axis.

However, the announcement angered residents in Mali's north who often feel ignored by Bamako, especially after rumours started to spread that a company charged with building a new road in Timbuktu had been diverted to the Kayes region - a claim the government denies. Since last weekend, hundreds of young people have been blocking access to the airport of Timbuktu, a UNESCO world heritage site, as part of a protest calling for better infrastructure and improved security. They also managed to halt water traffic to the country's center and south for three days. —AFP

## 'We just have to brave it': Women face assault on Zimbabwe buses

When Zimbabwe's government started running a bus system earlier this year with fares on average one-third lower than those of private bus companies, Thandekile Gama was excited. The 33-year-old hairdresser had grown tired of paying up to 3 Zimbabwe dollars (less than 10 US cents) every time she took a trip within Bulawayo, the country's second-largest city, so the new bus system with fares capped at 50 cents seemed like a gift.

But that gift came at a cost: Gama said the more affordable fares have led to overcrowding on the government-owned buses, putting her and other women she knows at greater risk of sexual harassment and assault as they travel. "The buses are crowded, as would be expected, but there are creeps who ride the buses to fondle women," she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation. "You just feel a hand feeling you up and then disappearing."

Reports of harassment and rape on public transportation are on the rise, said Auxillia Sibanda, an assistant inspector with the Zimbabwe Republic Police (ZRP), at a public meeting in July. She did not provide specific numbers, noting that the statistics were still being compiled. World Bank figures show about one-third of Zimbabwe's 16 million people live in urban areas, and that its urban population is growing about 2 percent annually.

Across the country, rapid population growth has led to increased demand for public utilities, including transport, according to legislator and women's rights defender Tabitha Khumalo. But authorities did not anticipate the impact of that demand on the safety of female commuters using public transportation such as private and state-run buses as well as

## Israeli economic growth overshadows struggles of poor

With the lowest unemployment rate in the Mediterranean, Israel can give the impression of having achieved an economic miracle. But its growth can obscure a darker side in poorer neighborhoods where families' struggles with the cost of living are acute. At 10:30 am, the first of the pensioners begin arriving at Lasova (Satisfied in Hebrew), a soup kitchen in south Tel Aviv, paying the young receptionist one shekel (25 cents) before taking a place at one of the tables.

Today's menu: Pasta, soup, salad, rolls, chicken and soft drinks. The blades of the fans whirl from the high ceilings of the erstwhile synagogue, brought back to life by the hundreds of people coming for a hot meal every day, and Mazal makes her entrance. The bespectacled redhead launches into her life story while eating, from her rough beginnings to the British sweetheart who sends her text messages in Hebrew with the help of Google Translate.

Each month Mazal receives a pension of 2,600 shekels (\$740). Her part-time cleaning work brings in another 2,200 shekels (\$625), but "it's not enough." "You've got rent, you've got electricity, a phone, other expenses," the 66-year-old sighed. "Everything is expensive." A divorced mother of two and grandmother of four, Mazal found herself homeless a few years ago, squatting near Tel Aviv's bus station for a year-and-a-half before the state provided her with social housing in a small city outside of Israel's economic capital.

But she still comes to Lasova several times a week to escape her solitude and enjoy a square meal. "I can't afford to buy food. I don't have money," she said. "I have a sick brother with cancer who I help. He can't move around much and I buy things for him. I

also help my daughters and my grandchildren sometimes too. "You can't live like this," she said.

unlicensed "pirate" taxis, she said. The government re-launched the Zimbabwe United Passenger Company (Zupco) buses in January, several years after the state-owned company's fleet was grounded following a litany of problems that included millions of dollars of debt and allegations of government corruption.

At the time of the re-launch, information minister Monica Mutsvangwa said Zupco was part of the modernisation of the national transport system and assured the nation that there would be "adequate security" to protect passengers. Zupco's acting CEO Everisto Madangwa said in a phone interview that those security measures include assigning at least one police officer to each bus, "to ensure passenger comfort and safety".

Madangwa declined to directly respond to the accusations of sexual harassment on the company's buses, but said the government regularly adds to the fleet to both meet demand and decrease congestion on the buses. He added that the company plans to grow from the current 500 buses to 3,000 countrywide, without specifying a timeline for the target.

### Financial respite

Madangwa could not provide figures for how many passengers use the Zupco buses daily, but noted that the bus system has been popular from the first day it started running. Gama and other passengers say much of that popularity stems from the low fares, which provide some financial respite for a population struggling through crippling inflation and shortages of bread, fuel and hard currency. Female passengers have long been subjected to whistles, crude comments and groping on buses, Gama explained, but with so many people using the Zupco system, the harassment has become more aggressive and invasive. "The sexual harassment has become too much, but (these) buses are the cheapest," she told Thomson Reuters Foundation as she stood in a long queue to board a Zupco bus. "We just have to brave it."

A 2018 Thomson Reuters Foundation survey of 1,000 women in five of the world's biggest commuter cities - London, New York, Mexico City, Tokyo and Cairo - found 52 percent cited safety as their top concern while using transport. For Khumalo, the problem of women's safety on

### The 'invisibles'

Hundreds of meals are served at Lasova daily to senior citizens, African migrants, the unemployed and the homeless under the watchful eye of Ravit Reichman. "They are the invisible people of Israel, who nobody cares about," said Reichman, sporting short bleached hair, tattoos and leather boots. Reichman ran kitchens in the military for over two decades before joining Lasova. Nearby, two new towers are being built, with skyscrapers dotting the landscape toward the beach.

Innovation has helped boost Israel's economy over the past 15 years to the point that the Jewish state has joined the leading pack of industrialized countries as far as growth and jobs are concerned. In July, the unemployment rate fell again to 3.7 percent. The average salary stood at 11,175 shekels a month - or \$3,175. But according to Israel's National Insurance Institute, almost 1.8 million people of the country's nearly nine million residents live below the poverty line.

And by the standards of the OECD - the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development - the "start-up nation" is lagging behind in terms of social equality. "It's a paradox since we're living the 15 years of Israel's golden economic age, in which the per capita income has almost doubled and passed some European states," said Gilles Darmon, director of the Latet NGO that distributes food to organizations such as Lasova nationwide.

### 'Working poor'

Year after year, studies show two groups topping the poverty data - Arabs and ultra-Orthodox Jews, both with swiftly growing demographics. Among the former, many women prefer to stay home to raise children. In the latter group, men work less in order to devote themselves to religious studies, according to John Gal, co-author of a poverty report issued by the Taub Center for Social Policy Studies. "The moment you have

Zimbabwean cities' public transport systems is a "recent phenomenon, seen after the entry of government buses and proliferation of pirate taxis". She and a group of other female legislators have lobbied the government to set up a database of sex offenders "as many of these perpetrators are repeat offenders". In general, said Khumalo - who also serves as the national chair of the opposition Movement for Democratic Change - the government could do more to protect and support survivors of sexual violence. Figures released in 2018 by the Musasa Project, a women's rights group, revealed that up to 50 percent of rape cases in Zimbabwe go unprosecuted. Lawmakers are currently drafting a bill that proposes a mandatory minimum of 60 years for the rape of anyone under the age of 12.

### Fear of reporting

Bulawayo police spokesman Abednico Ncube told the Thomson Reuters Foundation that police were doing everything they could to ensure women's safety on public transportation. But the congestion means officers "cannot monitor each and every passenger", he added. Ncube advised anyone who experiences sexual harassment while riding on a bus to report the incident immediately after it happens. "It is important for victims of indecent assault to attract the attention of witnesses as soon as they feel violated so that police can effect arrests," he said.

But there is a problem with that advice, said Gillian Chinzele, project director at the Institute for Young Women's Development, which supports women's participation in political processes. Women in Zimbabwe are often reluctant to report harassment for fear of not being taken seriously, she said. "There must be training of the police on how to deal with cases of public violence against women ... as a way of instilling confidence in the victims," said Chinzele. Gama, the hairdresser in Bulawayo, agreed, saying that she and other women she knows have learned to live with being groped on the bus. Because to go to the police, she said, is to risk being ridiculed for reporting a "petty crime with no known perpetrator". "It's difficult as it is to report rape," she said. "Imagine trying to report being fondled by a hand you did not see." —Reuters



People dine in the Lasova restaurant soup kitchen in Tel Aviv on Sept 8 2019. —AFP

two or three children then it is problematic," he said. "The cost of living is high, particularly housing. On the other hand health-care, education and transportation are less expensive than in other advanced economies."

In 2011, tens of thousands of Israelis took to the streets to protest the high cost of living, pushing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to announce new housing plans. Ahead of Israel's Sept 17 elections, the social issue seems to be off the radar, eclipsed by debates over security, religion and state, and Netanyahu's legal woes. In its latest report, the OECD warns of the "growing share" of "working poor" in Israel.

After his meal at Lasova, Alexander, a 45-year-old temporary worker, returns to the street with a full belly and a shekel less. "I still have four shekels on me. It's really hard," he said. "Once I pay my rent I have nothing left. It's the same for friends of mine who earn 4,000-5,000 shekels a month." And the elections? "It's a battle between guys to see who's strongest." —AFP