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## Amazonian Nations Sign Joint Declaration but Fail to Agree Joint Target to End Illegal Deforestation

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On August 9, 2023, the Brazilian city of Belém hosted a summit of the Amazonian Cooperation Treaty Organization (ACTO) with the participation of Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela. The summit resulted in a 10,000 word joint declaration (the Belém Declaration) containing **113 objectives and principles**. However, the Belém Declaration failed to include a joint pledge to end illegal deforestation in the Amazon region by 2030. This omission attracted criticism and raised questions concerning whether Amazonian countries have sufficient political will and enforcement capabilities to effectively protect the vast region from illegal activity with significant environmental impact, among the most problematic being deforestation for agriculture and wildcat gold mining.

The ACTO summit represents the first meeting of Amazonian nations in more than a decade and has been reactivated at the initiative of the Brazilian President, Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva. Regional cooperation between Amazon nations dates back to the signing of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty in 1978, which aimed to promote harmonious and sustainable development of the Amazon region. The ACTO was formed in 1995 to strengthen and implement the objectives of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty. The ACTO has been inactive recently and the summit in Belém represented the organization’s first meeting in 14 years. As set out in the Belém Declaration, “ACTO is the only intergovernmental coordination body of the eight Amazonian countries for the joint development of projects and actions that produce equitable and beneficial results for the Amazonian countries, due to its institutionality, its extensive knowledge of the region and the relevant experience of its Permanent Secretariat in coordinating dialogue and implementing development cooperation initiatives.”

In May, the UN confirmed that Belém will also host the 30th UN Conference of Parties on Climate Change (COP30) in November 2025. The ACTO summit represents a statement of intent from the Lula administration in the buildup to COP30 and follows up on a package of eight environmental protection decrees **announced** on World Environment Day in June.

The full **Belém Declaration** covers a wide range of topics including the:

- development of a joint negotiating position at climate summits;
- development of Amazonian cities, sustainable infrastructure and regional entrepreneurship;
- promotion of science, education and innovation including the establishment of a regional scientific body (akin to the UN International Panel on Climate Change) to meet annually and produce reports on science related to the Amazon rainforest;
- protection of indigenous rights including sovereignty and food, health and social security;
- promotion of environmental protection covering forests, coastal zones, vulnerable ecosystems, biodiversity and water resources; and
- enhancement of international police and judicial cooperation in combatting illegal activity.

However, due to insufficient consensus among ACTO members, the Belém Declaration did not contain a joint pledge to end illegal deforestation by 2030; a fixed deadline to end illegal gold mining; or a commitment to halt new oil exploration in the Amazon region.

**Taking the Temperature: As we have covered extensively this year, President Lula placed environmental initiatives near the top of his agenda and he has been especially focused on highlighting these aspects of his governmental program to international counterparts in the U.S. and Europe. He has secured notable successes, including a pledge of \$500 million from the Biden Administration for the Amazon Fund. One of Lula's longstanding geopolitical ambitions is to increase international cooperation among South American nations and, more broadly, countries in the global South. The reactivation of ACTO represents a potentially important step in Brazil's efforts to position itself as the regional leader on environmental protection but the failure of other members (holdouts, reportedly Bolivia and Venezuela) to match its commitment to end illegal deforestation by 2030 is an obstacle.**

**Looking beyond ambitious declarations of future intent, the international community remains focused on Brazil's on-the-ground efforts to revitalize environmental protection enforcement activity. The first raids under the new administration took place in January this year. The reactivation appears to be showing some early success. In the first seven months of 2023, deforestation dropped by 42% compared to 2022. On September 5, the Lula administration announced a federal program to provide up to \$120 million in financial support to Amazonian municipalities that have the greatest reductions in deforestation rates. The initiative will be financed from the Amazon Fund and funds must be invested in land titling, monitoring and control of deforestation and fires, and sustainable production. As organized crime groups responsible for illegal deforestation and wildcat mining operate across national borders, regional cooperation between ACTO members will be important as these efforts continue.**

**Illegal economic activity in the Amazon region remains a priority for legislators and regulators outside of Brazil. As we covered in June, the European Parliament adopted amendments to the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Regulation requiring large companies operating in the EU to conduct due diligence to identify, prevent, mitigate or end negative impacts on human rights and the environment, including biodiversity loss**

and environmental degradation such as occurs in the Amazon. Amazonian deforestation is also driving civil litigation. Earlier this year, [a complaint was filed](#) in the U.S. against Cargill, one of the world's largest soy and grain traders, over alleged deforestation and related human rights issues in Brazil.