April 16, 2021

President Joseph Biden
The White House
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

In anticipation of the Leaders Summit on Climate on April 22 and 23, we are writing to express our deep concern regarding the accelerating destruction of the Brazilian Amazon rainforest that threatens to undermine global efforts to combat climate change. We support your efforts and those of Presidential Envoy Kerry to promote cooperation between the United States and Brazil on issues of climate action and forest conservation, particularly because of Brazil’s past leadership on these issues.

As the devastating toll of wildfires in the American western states and the manmade fires in the Amazon have shown, both Brazil and the United States must do more to advance strong environmental and forest management policies. However, this can only be possible if the Bolsonaro administration begins to take Brazil’s climate commitments seriously – and only if it protects, supports, and engages meaningfully with the many Brazilians who can help the country fulfill them.

In recent weeks, the Bolsonaro administration has repeatedly expressed interest in working with the United States on environmental issues. But, until now, it has demonstrated no serious interest in working with the multiple actors within Brazil who would play essential roles in any serious efforts to save the Amazon rainforest.

On the contrary, President Bolsonaro has publicly derided Brazil’s main environmental agency and sabotaged its ability to enforce the country’s environmental laws. He has sought to weaken the protection of Indigenous territories, which are often subject to invasion by illegal loggers, miners, and ranchers. He has been openly contemptuous of Brazilian environmentalists, referring to them as a “cancer” in the Amazon that he “can’t kill,” falsely accusing them of setting the rainforest on fire and seeking to exclude them from their long-established involvement in key aspects of environmental policy-making.

A second area of concern is President Bolsonaro’s apparent reluctance to curb the lawlessness that fuels the destruction of the Amazon. In its 2019 report, Rainforest Mafias, Human Rights Watch documented how the deforestation was driven largely by powerful criminal networks that use intimidation and violence – with near total impunity – against those who seek to defend the rainforest. His administration has not provided a credible response to the grave problems revealed in this and subsequent reports by Human Rights Watch or other reputable sources. On the contrary, President Bolsonaro’s rhetoric and policies have effectively given a green light to
the dangerous criminals operating in the Amazon, allowing them to dramatically expand their activities.

A third concern is the Bolsonaro administration’s disregard for Brazil’s climate commitments – including, most notably, the commitment enshrined in Brazil’s national climate law to reduce deforestation to under 3925 square kilometers per year by 2020. Last year, the deforestation rate reportedly climbed to almost three times that amount, reaching its highest level in more than a decade. Moreover, the Nationally Determined Contribution that the Bolsonaro administration submitted in December is less ambitious than the original one from 2016, according to the Climate Action Tracker, and would actually allow Brazil to increase its greenhouse gas emissions over the next decade.

Given this record of unmet climate commitments, it is our view that any U.S. assistance to Brazil related to the Amazon should be conditioned on the Brazilian government making significant and sustained progress in two critical areas: reducing deforestation and ending impunity for environmental crimes and acts of intimidation and violence against forest defenders. The Bolsonaro administration’s ability to achieve these results will also be a key factor in determining the future trajectory of the U.S.–Brazil partnership, and whether we support Brazil in other areas of mutual interest such as military and economic cooperation, including its bid for accession to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Sincerely,

PATRICK LEAHY
United States Senator

CHRIS VAN HOLLEN
United States Senator

BRIAN SCHATZ
United States Senator

CHRISTOPHER S. MURPHY
United States Senator

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