

# Used to fresh air, Brazil's modernist capital chokes on wildfire smoke

AFP- Brasilia's iconic futuristic buildings, designed by architect Oscar Niemeyer, have been engulfed in a thick haze of smoke in recent days.

Several parts of Brazil are suffocating due to raging wildfires, but the fumes are new to the modernist capital, whose residents are used to expansive blue skies and clean air during the dry season.

"I have lived in Brasilia for 30 years, this is the first time I have seen this kind of smoke," said Moacir do Nascimento Santo, 47, a driver with two young children.

"(It) compromises our breathing, our vision, and it is worrying for the children – they suffer with all this smoke," he told AFP.

Situated in the center of the country, Brasilia was carefully planned from scratch on an empty plateau to become the capital in 1960, and is now home to 2.8 million people.

Its wide avenues, organized neighborhoods and green, open spaces are a world apart from other Brazilian cities such as Rio de Janeiro or Sao Paulo – and much less polluted.

Forest fires have been raging for several weeks in Brazil, particularly in the Amazon rainforest in the north and the immense Pantanal wetland in the center-west of the country.

The smoke engulfing Brasilia is a result of fires near the capital, but also winds bringing in smoke from other regions, particularly the southeastern state of Sao Paulo, several hundred kilometers away, where bushfires devastated thousands

of hectares of agricultural land last week.

Authorities say most fires are human-caused.

– ‘At war against fire’ –

Many residents of Brasilia have resorted to using protective masks when venturing outside.

“This time of year is usually dry, but this is the first time I’ve seen the cloud of smoke,” said Isaac Tomas, a civil servant in the Chamber of Deputies.

“It’s very worrying. I already have problems with rhinitis during the drought, but now, with the smoke, it’s even worse.”

The Brasilia Environmental Institute on Sunday said the air quality was “very poor.” The situation had improved by Wednesday but not in all parts of the city.

Local health services reported a spike in cases of rhinitis, asthma attacks, pneumonia and conjunctivitis.

At Santa Lucia Hospital, the number of patients treated for respiratory problems on Monday was twenty times higher than average, according to Lucas Albanaz, a manager at the facility.

The doctor said patients were “suffering from coughing, red eyes, dry mouth or skin, and symptoms of dehydration.”

Brazil has long struggled with fires, largely linked to slash-and-burn techniques used for illegal agricultural expansion.

An extreme drought, linked by experts to climate change, has exacerbated the situation this year.

Environment Minister Marina Silva said this week that Brazil was “at war against fire and crime.”

Due to the drought and “extreme temperatures,” the government

on Tuesday extended an order that requires organizers of concerts, festivals and other large events, including football matches, to provide free drinking water to spectators.

The measure first came into force last November, after the death of a 23-year-old woman at a Taylor Swift concert in Rio amid a heatwave.

AFP