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Firefighters near Robore, Bolivia, walk where wildfires have destroyed the forest Aug. 19, 2019. (CNS/Reuters/Department of Santa Cruz)

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Wildfires raging in Bolivia and Brazil underscore the urgency of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon that Pope Francis has called for October, said Bishop Eugenio Coter of the apostolic vicariate of Pando in northern Bolivia.

Fires in the Bolivian Amazon have burned an area about the size of Connecticut and left at least 50 families homeless.

By bringing together church leaders, indigenous people and lay leaders to discuss issues that are important for the Catholic Church in the nine-country Amazon region, "the pope is making a prophetic gesture," Coter told Catholic News Service.

The devastation from the fires "shows that the pope is right – this is an emergency for humanity and for the church," he said.

Farmers in the Amazon basin often set fire to fields and pastures at this time of year to prepare land for planting. Hot temperatures and winds can quickly whip flames out of control, and most communities lack firefighting equipment.

This year's fire season is the worst that people can remember, Coter said. There has been an increase in fires in recent weeks, especially in the lowlands near Bolivia's eastern border with Brazil, in an area known as the Chiquitania.

The devastation is partly because of government policies that encourage farmers to clear more forest for cattle ranching, the bishop said.

In April, the Bolivian and Chinese governments signed an agreement that will allow Bolivia to export beef to China.

The Bolivian Institute of Foreign Trade, which includes various trade associations, among them livestock and timber groups, expects beef exports to total 20 million tons by the end of the year. The goal is to double that amount by the end of 2020, which will mean nearly doubling the number of cattle in the country.

A law passed in 2015 allowed small farmers and communities to cut down forests and clear up to 50 acres for farming and ranching. In early July, the government issued a decree that expanded permission to use fire to clear forest for crops and pasture.

A sharp increase in wildfires followed in the Chiquitania region, Coter said.

The government also has encouraged small farmers to move from the Andean highlands to new settlements in the Amazonian lowlands, he said.

In some cases, that has led to conflicts with local residents. In the town of Robore, 250 miles east of the city of Santa Cruz de la Sierra, demonstrators burned the local police station during a protest in November 2018 after migrants were allowed to settle in protected areas. Fires are burning in at least one or those areas.

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People who are new to farming in the Amazonian lowlands often do not take adequate steps to keep fires from spreading out of control, said Alberto Caballero Mendoza, 53, who teaches at a Catholic high school in Robore.

Smoke from wildfires in that area is irritating residents' eyes and aggravating cases of asthma, he said. The smoke was so thick in the nearby community of San Lorenzo Nuevo that residents took refuge in Robore.

In Brazil, fires also are burning in areas where industrial-scale farms and cattle ranches are expanding into the forest, especially along the southern and western edge of the Amazon.

Ironically, Coter said, both Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro, who leads a rightist government, and Bolivia's leftist President Evo Morales, are implementing the same kinds of agricultural policies.

"The two countries most affected (by fires) have governments at opposite ends of the political spectrum, but their position on deforesting the Amazon is the same," he said. "There is no political or economic plan for the Amazon that does not depend on the extraction of natural resources."

Coter and other Bolivia church leaders are meeting in Cochabamba with delegates from the country's Amazonian church jurisdictions to prepare for the synod, set for Oct. 6-27 in Rome.

The delegates raised various issues that they would like the bishops to discuss during that meeting, including migration from the Andean highlands to the Amazon

region, the expansion of farming and ranching, and helping young people maintain Christian values.

One very specific suggestion from delegates from the Chiquitania, he said, was assistance in obtaining tractors or other equipment to help farmers prepare their fields so they would not have to use fire.

Coter said he hopes the synod will encourage people to pressure their governments for policies that will protect the Amazon forest and the livelihoods of the people living there.

The current emergency in the region "shows clearly that we are all interconnected," he said, "and this affects the entire world."

This story appears in the **Synod for the Amazon** feature series. View the full series .