

A statue of Christ of Peace atop San Pedro Hill is seen Sept. 10, 2024, shrouded in smoke caused by wildfires in Cochabamba, Bolivia. In a statement published Sept. 9, the Bolivian Bishops' Conference said the country is suffering from "an ecological disaster caused by human hands" that demands "a prompt response to the environmental damage caused by indiscriminate burning and fires in the Chiquitanía (region) and in so many places in eastern Bolivia." (OSV News/Patricia Pinto, Reuters)

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The bishops of Bolivia urged the country's authorities to act quickly in staving off irreparable harm to people and the environment as raging wildfires continue to devastate millions of acres.

In a statement published Sept. 9, the Bolivian Bishops' Conference said the country is suffering from "an ecological disaster caused by human hands" that demands "a prompt response to the environmental damage caused by indiscriminate burning and fires in the Chiquitanía (region) and in so many places in eastern Bolivia."

"The Catholic Church calls on the responsible political authorities to act quickly and effectively, thus preventing this environmental and national catastrophe from increasing," the bishops said. "It is not only a matter of extinguishing the fires, but also of helping all the people who are suffering as a result of this situation and are affected in their economy and daily lives."

Citing estimates made by the Brazilian space research agency Inpe, the Reuters news agency reported that Bolivia has experienced its largest number of wildfires this year compared to previous years, with more than 7.5 million acres of land burned so far.

According to the forest monitoring site, Global Forest Watch, there have been an estimated 47,675 fire alerts over the past year. "This is unusually high compared to previous years going back to 2012," the site stated.

With firefighters in the country spread thin, Bolivian government authorities have called for international aid.

At a press conference, Edmundo Novillo, Bolivia's defense minister, told journalists the country's declaration of a national emergency would streamline coordination of international support.

"This will allow us to have more agile and effective support from friendly countries and from international cooperation," Novillo said, according to Reuters.

In their statement, the Bolivian bishops spoke out against the clearing of land through agricultural burning in the country, resulting not only in "damage to Creation but also damage to the people who inhabit these territories."

Destroying homes and causing air pollution came "with serious consequences for human health, especially for children and the elderly."

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Citing Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical on the environment, Laudato Si', the bishops reaffirmed the church's commitment and solidarity to those suffering as a result of the environmental disaster in the country because "concern for nature is inseparable from justice for the poor, commitment to society and interior peace."

"Our Bolivia is one, and the vision of the institutions must be not only one of equality, but of preference for those regions of the country that need more help, and at this moment it is eastern Bolivia that demands the urgent and rapid assistance of all Bolivians," the bishops said.

While the statement by the Bolivian bishops' conference was more diplomatic in its call on authorities, Auxiliary Bishop Stanislaw Dowlaszewicz of Santa Cruz de la Sierra openly criticized the government's handling of the disaster.

In his homily at Mass Sept. 8 in the Cathedral Basilica of St. Lawrence, Dowlaszewicz said the wildfires were "an ecological disaster, a national disaster."

"Those who should be responding to this catastrophe — our authorities — are deaf, mute and blind," the bishop said.

Recalling the Sunday Gospel reading from Mark, in which Jesus healed a deaf man with a speech impediment, Dowlaszewicz called on government authorities to not avert their eyes and to look at the suffering of their people.

"Today we repeat to all those in charge the words of Jesus from today's Gospel: 'Ephphatha,' open your eyes and see the reality, see how children, the elderly, the sick in hospitals, and people living in the countryside are suffering from the smoke of the fires, from the smoke that covers the purest sky in America," the bishop said.