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Destruction of the rain forest has fallen to its lowest annual level in 21 years, Brazil said ahead of the climate summit in Copenhagen next month.

Amazon deforestation hits lowest level in 21 years: Brazil

Environmentalists praise drop, but say more to be done

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BRASILIA, BRAZIL

Destruction of the Amazon rain forest in Brazil has fallen to its lowest annual level in 21 years, the government said on Thursday, in a boost to the country's green credentials ahead of a global climate summit.

Deforestation plunged 45 per cent in the year to July to 7,008 square kilometres, the lowest figure achieved since the National

Institute of Space Studies began monitoring destruction of the world's largest forest in 1988.

"We are cleaning up our house," Dilma Rousseff, chief of staff for President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva, told reporters at a news conference in the capital, Brasilia.

A sharp drop had been widely expected based on preliminary figures from the space agency, which uses satellites to measure deforestation.

Brazil has been under pressure for years to slow the encroachment of loggers and ranchers who are blamed for much of the destruction of the forest, which has lost about 20 per cent of its area since the 1970s.

Deforestation in Brazil reached a peak of 27,329 square kilometres in the 2003/2004 period.

The government says improved policing has helped cut deforestation, but environmentalists argue lower commodity prices resulting from the global economic downturn have also been a factor.

Deforestation has in the past increased when demand for soybeans, beef and timber have gone up.

Brazil's management of the Amazon, whose destruction accounts for about two thirds of its carbon emissions, is expected to be a key issue at next month's Copenhagen summit, which seeks to frame a new global treaty on climate change.

"Today, we are conscious that the climate question is the most serious we are facing," said Lula, who called the fall in deforestation "extraordinary."

The environment ministry is proposing that roughly half of Brazil's proposed 40 per cent carbon emissions cut would come from reducing deforestation.

The government is aiming for an 80 per cent reduction in the deforestation rate by 2020, based on the annual average of 19,500 square kilometres between 1996 and 2005.

Environmental group Greenpeace said in a statement that while the sharp drop was important, there was still too much deforestation and the government's target was not ambitious enough.

"The president . . . will be happy if in 11 years' time the Amazon forest is being destroyed at a rate of a little less than three cities the size of Sao Paulo a year," it said, referring to South America's largest city.