
Brazil: Belo Monte dam would turn the Xingú River into a river of blood

A hydroelectric complex comprising two dams and the diversion of the Xingú River from its natural course on the stretch that flows through the state of Pará; a cost of more than 16 billion dollars; the flooding of 516 square kilometres of Amazon forest; impacts on a total of 1,522 square kilometres of forested lands; between 100 and 142 square kilometres of land left in permanent drought; changes in the river ecosystem, with the introduction of foreign fish species and the extinction of others; loss of biodiversity, which is the source of food and income for millions of people in the Amazon; direct or indirect impacts on 30 indigenous territories inhabited by more than 13,000 people from 24 indigenous ethnic groups; the forced displacement of between 20,000 and 40,000 people; 80,000 unemployed people; the possibility of other dams being built upstream. This is the scenario created by the Belo Monte dam on the Xingú River, a project originally conceived in the 1970s during the Brazilian military dictatorship.

The auction for construction of the hydroelectric dam project was won by the Norte Energia consortium, in which the largest shareholder is the mixed-capital state-controlled power company, Eletronorte.

In Brazil, 25% of the electricity produced is consumed by nine mining and energy companies: Alcoa, ArcelorMittal, Camargo Corrêa, CSN, Gerdau, Samarco, Vale do Rio Doce and Votorantim. A number of these companies have a strong interest in the construction of the Belo Monte dam – which would be the world's third largest – for the expansion of their extractive operations.

If the dam is built, between 20% and 30% of the inhabitants of Altamira will be permanently displaced, according to the environmental impact assessment (EIA) for the project.

From the moment plans for the project were announced, the resistance of social movements and indigenous communities in the region has continued to grow. A landmark in the resistance struggle was a gathering held in Altamira in February 1989, the First Encounter of Indigenous Peoples of the Xingú, where participants spoke out against the decisions adopted for the Amazon region without the participation of its indigenous peoples, and against the construction of the Xingú hydroelectric dam complex. More than 3,000 people took part in the encounter, including 650 indigenous people from various parts of Brazil and other countries, representatives of environmental and social movements, and the Brazilian and foreign media.

Over the following years, the project has been redesigned numerous times, new viability studies and EIAs have been conducted, and consultations and public hearings have been held, with a marked lack of transparency throughout the whole process.

Opponents to the dam have fought back, filing public civil suits for the suspension of environmental licences, preparing documents, organizing debates, and writing letters to the president's office calling for the suspension of the dam's construction.

But in 2007, the government of former President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva included the Belo Monte

project in its Programme for the Acceleration of Growth (PAC) as a key priority. This spurred the organization of the Xingú Alive Forever (Xingú Vivo para Sempre) Encounter, in 2008, which brought together representatives of indigenous and riverine communities, social movements, civil society organizations, researchers and specialists. In 2009, the Belo Monte case was presented in a public hearing at the OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in Washington, D.C.

In December 2009, representatives of a number of different indigenous peoples (Arara, Guarani, Juruna, Kayapó, Xavante, Xipaia, Xicrin and Yanomami) issued a manifesto denouncing the Brazilian government's indifference. The declaration talked about the 20 years of struggle waged by indigenous peoples against the Belo Monte project and concluded by saying that the Xingú River could be turned into a "river of blood."

In February 2010, the Brazilian Ministry of the Environment, through the environmental agency IBAMA, granted a provisional environmental licence for the Belo Monte dam complex, with 40 conditions attached. This sparked an upsurge in opposition. The Xingú Alive Movement, which gathers together more than 100 organizations opposed to the project, joined with 40 other social organizations to submit a formal petition to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights calling for precautionary measures to halt the dam's construction. The petition stated that the provisional licence for the Belo Monte project had no legal basis and had been issued without the fulfilment of the requirements established by IBAMA.

One year later, in February 2011, IBAMA granted a partial installation licence for the initiation of construction work, the clearing of 238 hectares of forest, and the opening of access roads on the Bacajá and Xingú Rivers.

It should be stressed that the category of "partial installation licence" does not exist in Brazilian environmental legislation, as was pointed out by a panel of specialists monitoring debate on the project. And as federal prosecutor Felicio Pontes Junior observed in a recent blog article, from which an excerpt is presented below, this is only one of the numerous irregularities and illegalities that have characterized the history of this megaproject.

On February 8, 2011, a petition with more than half a million signatures opposing the project was submitted to a representative of the current Brazilian president, Dilma Rousseff. Paradoxically, the representative expressed the willingness to participate in a "dialogue" with indigenous and other resistance leaders in the region but while moving ahead with the project's execution at the same time.

What follows is an excerpt from an article posted by federal prosecutor Felicio Pontes Junior on his blog (<http://belomontedeviolencias.blogspot.com/>), in which he comments on the provisional environmental licence granted in 2010 and the recently issued partial installation licence:

Belo Monte's provisional licence (LP) was granted by IBAMA in February 2010 with 40 environmental conditions and 26 indigenous-related conditions attached. The LP does not allow for work on the project to begin. It is merely a preliminary planning licence. Through it, the agency issuing the licence states that the location and conception of the project are approved. Before work on the project itself can begin, another licence must be obtained: the installation licence (LI).

In order for the Norte Energia consortium – which was hastily put together on the eve of the hydroelectric dam auction – to initiate work, it must fulfil the conditions attached. Many of these conditions are, in fact, unresolved disputes. The government pressure for the issuing of the LP was

so great that the conflicts were turned into conditions.

Among the 40 environmental conditions we could cite, as an example, No. 9, which stipulates: (i) the initiation of construction and repair of educational and health facilities in Altamira and Vitória do Xingu; (ii) the initiation of basic sanitation works in these localities; and (iii) the installation of basic sanitation services in Belo Monte before the construction of workers housing. The Federal Public Ministry was able to access documents from the local authorities of these localities which demonstrate that nothing had been done as of 2010.

Another condition, this time No. 5 of the conditions related to indigenous peoples, requires, among other measures: (i) the physical demarcation of the Arara de Volta Grande and (ii) Cachoeira Seca Indigenous Lands; (iii) an agrarian survey and the beginning of the end of intrusion (withdrawal of non-indigenous people) from the Apyterewa Indigenous Land. None of this can be done overnight. The Federal Public Ministry itself has been trying for decades. And it is all extremely necessary.

In fact, even the environmental impact assessment carried out by Eletrobras and contractors predicts that some 100,000 workers will migrate to the area in search of employment on the project. Considering that the current population of Altamira is 94,000, and that, at most, the project will create approximately 19,000 jobs – and only in the third year, because in other years a smaller number of jobs will be available – one can easily conclude that, in addition to the demographic explosion, Altamira will also have at least 80,000 unemployed people.

Norte Energia attempted a manoeuvre to evade complying with these conditions. It requested a partial installation licence to break ground for the project. This does not exist in Brazilian legislation. Breaking ground is in itself work on the project. Or does anyone think that breaking ground alone will not attract migration?

In October 2010, the IBAMA technical team said “no” to this manoeuvre precisely because of non-compliance with the conditions established.

And it cannot be claimed that the localities affected will be compensated through the release of more public funds. Would these funds be sufficient for the construction and maintenance of hospitals, schools and judicial and security agencies in a region where the population will double in one year? Will these funds also double Altamira's annual budget? Obviously not.

What is taking shape is nothing other than a *déjà vu*. We will be left with the social chaos and the environmental damages. The multinationals will get the energy.