
Brazil: Dams would destroy isolated tribe Enawene Nawe's livelihood

The Enawene Nawe -- a small Amazonian tribe (over 420) who live by fishing and gathering in Mato Grosso state, Brazil -- are a relatively isolated people who were first contacted in 1974. They grow manioc and corn in gardens and gather forest products, like honey but fishing is their main livelihood and fish are a vital part of their diet, as they are one of the few tribes who eat no red meat. During the fishing season, the men build large dams across rivers and spend several months camped in the forest, catching and smoking the fish which is then transported by canoe to their village.

For decades the Enawene Nawe have faced invasion of their lands by rubber tappers, diamond prospectors, cattle ranchers and more recently soya planters - Maggi, the largest soya company in Brazil, illegally built a road on their land in 1997 (this was subsequently closed by a federal prosecutor). Although their territory was officially recognised and ratified by the government in 1996, a key area known as the Rio Preto was left out. This area is tremendously important to the Enawene Nawe both economically and spiritually - this is where they build their fishing camps and dams, and where many important spirits live.

Now, up to 11 dams are planned along the Juruena river, which flows through the Indians' territory. The dams will be funded by a consortium of businesses, many of whom are involved in the soya industry.

The Enawene Nawe are opposing the dams, and have launched an appeal for support to halt their construction. They spoke out:

"We are the Enawene Nawe of Halataikiwa village. We have just been to a meeting. We did not seek this meeting, it was the Brazilians who invited us. Together with our representatives, there were representatives from the Nambiquara, Pareci, Myky, and Rikbaktsa tribes.

At the meeting we spoke with a Brazilian about the building of dams. The Brazilian said, 'Come and look at the first dam we have already built.' He continued, 'The dams are a good thing, not a bad thing. The fish will not die, the water will not become dirty, the forest will not die.'

We communicated clearly to the people who want to build the dams, 'Do not build the dams, we do not want them.' As far as the Enawene Nawe are concerned, we are completely against the dams. We do not want a car nor do we want money. We are thinking about fish, and the water.

The Rikbaktsa people think the same. As soon as we got back home we, the Enawene Nawe, spoke together. After this, we spoke in Cuiabá [the capital of Mato Grosso state], to the public prosecutor. This person said that the situation was very difficult. So then we thought like this: OPAN [Brazilian NGO working with indigenous peoples] and the Federal Ministry of Public Affairs should see the impact report together; and soon we must go to Brasília so that all the Enawene Nawe can speak there.

We are seeking help from others, as we are very unhappy, very unhappy indeed."

Excerpted and edited from: "Dams threaten fishing tribe", Survival International, <http://www.survival-international.org/news.php?id=2193>, http://www.survival-international.org/tribes.php?tribe_id=194