
Brazil: Interamerican Development Bank promotes destruction of Upper Tocantins River

The Tocantins River is the main river in the hydrological system of the “cerrado” (savanna) and eastern Amazon region of Brazil. The Brazilian government is planning the construction of eight hydroelectric dams on the Tocantins and Araguaia Rivers. One of them is Cana Brava Dam, located 250 km north of Brasília, in the state of Goiás, which together with the already operational Tucuruí Dam and the Serra da Mesa Dam will form a nearly continuous 2,000 km staircase of reservoirs.

The Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) is the agency involved in the provision of financial support to the project by granting a U\$S 150 million loan so that Tractebel Brasil Ltda. --a subsidiary of Tractebel Belgium-- can build the dam. The Bank has already approved a loan for the construction of the North-South electricity transmission line, which runs along the Tocantins River, that will link the proposed dams network. If completed, this complex will severely affect the Tocantins and Araguaia Rivers, their associated ecosystems and the riverine populations. This biodiversity and resource-rich region --comprising part of the “cerrado” and the transition forests of the Amazon-- is already menaced by the high scale impacts to be provoked by the construction of the Araguaia-Tocantins hidrovía, an industrial waterway planned for soy bean transport.

The Environmental and Social Impact Brief for the Cana Brava project performed by the IDB to justify its loan has serious omissions and misstatements of fact. Its main assumption --that hydroelectric power is the most desired electricity generation alternative for the region-- is baseless, since the energy to be generated will be transmitted to the national electricity grid, principally to industrial cities in South-Central Brazil. Additionally the real financial, environmental and social costs of the project were not evaluated.

The IDB's study ignores the fact that the “cerrado” is one of the richest sites in biodiversity in the world, by considering that endangered species were not identified during the surveys, and that the Upper Tocantins is a system less productive when compared with the middle and lower reaches. It is not even clear whether the survey refers only to the area where the reservoir would be formed, or also to the broader area which will suffer the impacts of the dam. Its considerations regarding the social impacts of the project are also to be questioned. Whereas the report considers that “there are no major indigenous populations present in the area of direct influence”, it has been demonstrated by the FUNAI (National Indigenous Foundation of Brazil) and CIMI (Missionary Indigenist Council) that the area is inhabited by the Avá-Canoeiro indigenous people, a highly threatened ethnic group, known as the lords of the High Tocantins River and its entire valley. It is to be underscored that the Avá-Canoeiro have already suffered the loss of 10% of the area of their reserve because of the Serra da Mesa Dam. Additionally, an important community of “quilombos” --descendants of escaped black slaves who manage their land cooperatively-- live in the area affected by the project. The IDB's report does not mention them. The impact of the project on the local rural population is minimized, since the number of families affected by the dam is far greater than the 110 indicated in the report.

The arrogant attitude of both Tractebel and the IDB have generated a conflictive atmosphere in the region. Local dwellers have undertaken direct actions to press the company to discuss relevant

issues before the construction of the dam proceeds. For example, on January 16th 2000, 500 dam-affected people occupied the Cana Brava worksite, and on March 14th, marches and protests took place in Minaçu city. In March 2000 the coalition International Rivers Network (IRN) addressed the IDB President Mr. Enrique Iglesias to express its concern regarding the way in which the Bank was assessing the proposed loan, and to suggest some recommendations in order to avoid the negative impacts of the megaproject.

Nevertheless, the IDB has turned a deaf ear to protests and recommendations: in August 2000 a U\$S 160,2 million was approved for the construction of the Cana Brava Dam.

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Article based on information from: "BID aprueba U\$S 160,2 millones para apoyar proyecto hidroeléctrico Cana Brava en Brasil"; "O resurgimento dos Avá-Canoeiro", Folha do Meio Ambiente - Ano 11 - Edição 103 - Brasília/DF, abril-2000,