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## Brazil: The Struggle of the Xinguara Peoples in the Amazon

*The fight against the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Dam is still alive; but peoples of the territory have to deal with the denial of their basic rights, the increase in violence in the city and countryside, and the enormous challenges of continuing to produce after the impacts of “Belo Monster.”*

**The struggle against the Belo Monte Dam is still alive in the Xingu River area, state of Pará.** It is creative and feminine in nature. This struggle not only recognizes, definitively, that this mega-venture is socially, economically and environmentally unviable, but also **aims to guarantee that other predatory projects are not installed in the region.** An example of such a predatory project is Canadian mining company, Belo Sun, which is threatening the municipality of Volta Grande and everyone who lives near a river that has already been destroyed. Furthermore, peoples of the territory still have to deal with the denial of their basic rights, the increase in violence in the city and countryside, and the enormous challenges of continuing to produce after the impacts of “Belo Monster.”

Today, the need to oppose Jair Bolsonaro’s extreme right-wing government and its predatory vision for the Amazon seems obvious. However, it is important to remember that there are at least two stages of the landmark and ongoing fight against the Belo Monte dam. Initially, at the end of the military dictatorship in the 1980s, the installation of the dam was momentarily stalled. This was thanks to the mobilization of indigenous peoples of the Xingu, social movements, river-dwelling families, the Xingu Prelacy and the Ecclesiastical Grassroots Communities, who recognized the federal government and this project as enemies. In the second stage, when—for the first time—a self-declared left-wing group governed Brazil, the struggle for hearts and minds was not only between the ruling class and the working class, but to a large extent among popular groups themselves.

That is, the struggle that has taken place in this region since the first white colonizers arrived—which included the challenges of the rubber tapping period and the Trans-Amazonian Highway—now is in a distinctive chapter. The region has shown that **conflict will arise against any party or organization that does not stand with the people, regardless of its declared ideological spectrum, party flag or institution.** In the same radical way (in the sense of being rooted in non-negotiable popular demands), groups led or formed mostly by women continue to raise their voices against any project of death in the region. They are decrying the established bad-development model, and proposing a path of peace as the fruit of justice.

### ***Life Threatened in the Municipality of Volta Grande do Xingu***

The complexity of the Xingu river, the biodiversity that depends on it, the productive activities that historically have been developed along it and because of it, are threatened—following the installation of the dam, which forced 30,000 people to leave their lands. The most emblematic case, however, is that of Volta Grande do Xingu, a region of about 100 km<sup>2</sup>, where hundreds of river-dwelling indigenous Juruna and Arara families live. They learned to live with the seasonal cycles of the river, whose flow increases or diminishes depending on the time of year. **With the definitive installation of the dam in 2015, this flow is controlled by the Norte Energia consortium. Since then,**

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**agriculture, livestock production and fishing have been significantly impacted.** This shows how the so-called “Consensus Hydrograph”—proposed by the company to simulate the flow of water in the region, and which would come into effect after installation of the last turbines in late 2019—is destined to fail.

“The idea is that IBAMA (Brazilian Institute of the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources), researchers, Norte Energia and the communities monitor whether the flow released by Norte Energia damages the fauna, flora and life as a whole in Volta Grande for six years following completion of the dam construction. However, from what we have observed, we already know that **the impacts are very severe and tend to worsen**, which puts the consortium up against a wall. If it releases the necessary amount of water, it will not produce the energy it is supposed to; and if it produces that energy, the life of the Xingu will die,” says Cristiane Carneiro, researcher of aquatic life and traditional populations of the Xingu region. According to Carneiro, several researchers had thoroughly denounced this before the crushing process that the governments of Lula and Dilma used to impose the project.

“The fish can swim upstream but not downstream. Every day that goes by, it is harder for us to fish, because they are decreasing in number and size,” observes José Pereira, a fisherman, farmer and artisanal miner. According to Pereira—also known as Pirulito—it’s not only that productive activity has been jeopardized, but also that his community, Ressaca—in the municipality of Senador José Porfírio—has not received satisfactory compensatory measures from Norte Energia and the respective prefectures. **“They say that they have put money here, that they have spent billions, but I don’t see anything here; I just see people getting poorer and poorer,”** he says.

And if there is a significant feeling of abandonment in Ressaca, which is one of the best-structured communities of the region, the situation is considerably more challenging for Eduvirgis Ribeiro’s family, who live in Travessão do Miro in Senador José Porfírio. His family invests mainly in the production of cacao, among other crops, but much of the production is lost because the impact of the dry season is reaching the water table and drying the igarapés [small navigable streams]. This makes it difficult to raise small animals and for the crops to survive. “Our production and our way of life here are jeopardized, and we have the feeling of being invisible to Norte Energia and government officials. If we want any kind of improvement, it must come from our own pockets,” Eduvirgis says.

### ***Invisible Impacts***

María de Fátima, better known as “Baiana,” represents hundreds of inhabitants of the area near the mouth of the Iriri River, as well as the Arara indigenous peoples in Altamira. The group she leads, comprised of people who still have not been officially recognized as victims of the impacts of Belo Monte, began to fight in 2018 for this recognition and for basic public policies. Since then, her community has experienced the near disappearance of fish, diseases caused by water contaminated from the flooding of the forest, and difficulties in accessing health and educational services. For these reasons, they decided to denounce this cruel reality at the appropriate institutions.

“Our living situation here is egregious. Previously, we would fish and wait for the intermediary to come take our production. Now with the disappearance of the fish, many of us go hungry; not to mention that one of our neighbors died because he got sick, and nobody had fuel to take him to the city. So it was time to say ENOUGH,” says Baiana.

### ***Youth and Adolescents***

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Belo Monte displaced inhabitants from several islands in Altamira and from other towns of the territory. It also attracted a large number of workers to the municipalities of the region, which caused a significant increase in violence. This mainly impacts black youth and adolescents—especially in Altamira. “When the project came, it expelled river-dwelling people, who had a strong relationship with the river. That not only caused major mental health problems for people who had to go somewhere they didn’t want to; it also caused them to practically lose their main productive activity, fishing. And it caused a significant increase in violence—**an absurd increase in killings of black youth,**” says Antônia Melo, coordinator of the Xingu Alive Forever Movement.

“It is not safe for us to walk down the street. We know that they [different kinds of gunmen that are in the city] not only kill who they have to kill, but also who they want to. I do not have small children anymore, but I have a grandson, and I am worried sick that they could confuse him for someone else and kill him. That’s why I worry every time he has to go out,” says Raimunda Gomes. Gomes is a member of Xingu Alive and the River Dwellers Council, an organization created after peoples of the region won the right to return to lands on the banks of the river, and as an instrument to guarantee that those who deserve to return be able to.

This process, unprecedented in experiences with dams in Brazil, is mostly driven by women leaders. They are dealing with Norte Energia’s lack of follow-through in terms of meeting deadlines, as well as the virtually irreversible process of the youth: “The current generation of youth and adolescents have been away from our river territory for years; they have already built a relationship with the city and they don’t want to live by the river again; so I don’t know what will happen to artisanal fishing once the parents are gone,” says Josefa Oliveira, also from the River Dwellers Council. According to Oliveira, there are a couple problems: 1) many of the adolescents who went to the city after their parents were evicted from their land are not interested in life on the islands and 2) in the territory there is a lack of perspective from secondary education studies. “I was able to study only because I came to the city. There was no education after elementary school where my grandfather, a river dweller, lived,” she says.

### ***The Impact on Xinguara Women***

In the cities near Belo Monte, the levels of **violence, child sexual exploitation and human trafficking grew exponentially**, because the region was not prepared to receive the large influx of workers that were needed to build the dam.

“Destructive ventures like Belo Monte hurt women in particular, through an **increase in domestic violence and femicide**. We are the ones who are most impacted by the diseases contracted through the **loss of and expulsion from our territories**, homes, families and community ties; **the death of our sons and daughters** due to violence from **drug trafficking; sexual abuse; prostitution; poverty; unemployment and other losses**. With companies and governments committing so many violations against human rights, women have problems with depression, high blood pressure, deep sadness and some cases that have led to death,” alerts Antônia Melo, coordinator of the Xingu Alive Forever Movement. According to Melo, this reflection is based on a diagnosis made by a group of psychologists and psychiatrists from the University of Sao Paulo (USP) who worked with several families in Altamira.

Another issue is that a project of Belo Monte’s magnitude has a huge impact on the daily lives and living conditions of the local population. At the highest point of the project in June 2014, the number of workers at Belo Monte reached 33,000, even though a maximum of 19,000 workers was projected.

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**“In places where large projects are installed, sexual exploitation and prostitution become requirements in order for the project to exist and be completed—as historically one is tied to the other,”** says researcher Assis Oliveira, coordinator of the investigation, *Trabalhadores e Trabalhadoras de Belo Monte: percepções sobre exploração sexual e prostituição* [Male and Female Workers of Belo Monte: Perceptions on Sexual Exploitation and Prostitution]. From 2013 to 2014, the study identified “a total of six different kinds of sexual exploitation, which involved—to a greater or lesser degree—the presence of boys, girls and adolescents.” Under this model of development, places where large construction projects like Belo Monte are installed and houses of prostitution are historically linked (1).

**“Xinguara women are the most impacted, but they are also the ones who fought, fight and will continue to fight the most; and that is how we are going to resist Belo Sun,”** announces Antônia Melo.

In May 2019, the second *Xingu: Land of Resistance* workshop was held, with the slogan “Defenders of Human Rights and Nature.” It was convened by the Xingu Alive Forever Movement, the Trans-Amazonian and Xingu Black People’s Training Center, the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesiastical Network, the Xingu Prelacy, the *Pará Society for the Defense of Human Rights* and the Federal University of Pará. Hundreds of leaders participated in the gathering, and **countless reports of threats and conflicts—directly and indirectly caused by Belo Monte—**were documented. The document will be used as a political instrument to pressure authorities to take urgent measures related to each case; but the gathering also served to show that resistance in the territory remains strong.

Likewise, in late August 2019, there will be a regional workshop to **specifically discuss the murder of youth and adolescents in the countryside and city of Altamira, and throughout the entire Xingu region.** This workshop is promoted by Xingu Alive, the Xingu Women’s Collective and the Movement of Women from the Countryside and City of Altamira, along with CEDECA Emmaus and regional youth and adolescent organizations. Its objectives are to strengthen the struggle, so that all cases of violence are resolved and the responsible parties are punished; and to propose public policies for the prevention of violence.

*Xingu Alive Forever Movement (Movimento Xingu Vivo para Sempre), Brazil*

(1)  
<http://www.ihu.unisinos.br/entrevistas/552175-grandes-obras-como-belo-monte-incentivam-e-fomentam-o-mercado-do-sexo-no-brasil-entrevista-especial-com-assis-oliveira>