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Brazilian Environmental Agency Gives Belo Monte Dam Green Light as Government Continues to Invest in Hydroelectric Power

By Ana Cristina Powell

On June 1, 2011, the Brazilian environmental agency, the Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renováveis (IBAMA), gave the government the green light to proceed with construction of the controversial Belo Monte dam. After 30 years of planning and struggle against opposition to the project, the Belo Monte hydroelectric power plant will be built in the Xingu river basin. This would be the third-largest such facility in the world, after the Three Gorges Dam in China and the Itaipú dam, shared by Brazil and Paraguay.

IBAMA conceded the license despite national and international criticism and a recommendation from the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) that dam construction be suspended until the rights of local indigenous communities are guaranteed. The environmental group Amazon Watch and Amnesty International (AI) argue that constructing Belo Monte will drive more than 40,000 people from their homes, including the Juruna and Arara tribes whose way of life is based upon the Xingu River.

"Continuing with the construction before ensuring the rights of the indigenous communities are protected is equivalent to sacrificing human rights for development," said Guadalupe Marengo, AI's Americas deputy director.

IBAMA president Curt Trennepohl countered that "this license is technically, legally, and environmentally sustainable."

Until the June 1 decision, Marengo's concerns--along with public opposition from international figures like Canadian film director James Cameron, former US President Bill Clinton, former California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, and rock star Sting--presented an obstacle to the country's development plans for Belo Monte.

Still, despite the opposition of environmental groups and international public figures, large dams and their connected power plants are presented as a significant solution to climate change worldwide. This is especially the case in emerging economies like China, India, and Brazil, which are not willing to slow down and need to expand their energy production. The new hydroelectric power plants being built are intended to provide much needed low-carbon electricity to urban areas in these countries.

Brazil is one of the few countries that use hydroelectric power to produce the majority of their domestic electric energy. The power output from dams accounts for about 80% of the country's electricity. With the fast pace of its economic growth and President Dilma Rousseff's administration's desire to get closer to achieving energy independence, more hydroelectric

power plants are under construction. As part of this plan, Brazil is taking advantage of the potential of several rivers throughout its territory, but mostly in the Amazon region.

Other countries in the region are following the same blueprint. Currently more than 100 hydroelectric dams are planned in the Amazon region in Brazil and Peru. Chile is also planning several hydroelectric facilities amid opposition from environmental advocates.

In Brazil, the government began constructing the Jirau and Santo Antônio dams on the Madeira River in the Brazilian Amazon region in 2008. The two facilities will have a maximum capacity of 3,300 MW and 3,150 MW, respectively, much less than the 11,233 MW from Belo Monte, but still an important contribution to the country's power grid.

The construction has not been easy, though, and work at both sites was stopped recently because of workers' strikes. In March 2011, workers at the Jirau facility not only stopped work but also destroyed dormitories, offices, and buses used to transport them. The 24,000 workers at Jirau took the action to protest poor working conditions and inadequate medical care, including the lack of medical doctors at the sites, and the fact that some workers have died of malaria while working there.

After the riots, the government determined that there were too many people working at both sites and the number had to be reduced. In April 2011, work was restarted at Jirau after 8,000 workers were fired and returned to their home states. The Brazilian government said this has caused a delay of about six months in the construction of the two dams.

Another drawback to reliance on hydropower is that droughts can make the country vulnerable to supply shortages. Brazil had a taste of the problem when, in 2001 and 2002, the government had to impose consumption quotas to avoid blackouts in the most serious energy crises in the history of its power system.

Christian Poirier, Brazil program coordinator for Amazon Watch, says that "due to the Xingu's seasonal fluctuations, Belo Monte will only generate 39% of its capacity on average, making it highly inefficient."

Rousseff administration determined to build dams

The Brazilian government, however, is not being deterred by any of the anti-dam campaigns and protests or by workers' strikes. The Belo Monte dam is one of the Rousseff administration's most important works and her team is determined to ensure that it gets done.

Minister of Planning Miriam Belchior, in a statement on June 1, explained that, "parallel to the process of auction for the Belo Monte dam and the licensing of the project, approved today by IBAMA, the federal government has developed a proposal for sustainable development for the Xingu region. The focus of the plan is to, at the same time as it guarantees the expansion of the Brazilian energy matrix in an environmentally sustainable way, promote the economic and social growth of the population of the Xingu River, in the state of Pará."

On April 1, after the IACHR requested precautionary measures for the members of the indigenous communities of the Xingu river basin, the Brazilian Ministério das Relações Exteriores, in an official response, pointed out that the appropriate studies had been conducted, the

communities involved consulted, and all issues had been addressed. "The Brazilian government considers the request from the IACHR premature and unjustified," said the document.

On June 1, Minister of Energy Edison Lobão made a statement basically guaranteeing that Belo Monte would start operating in 2015. "Without a doubt there will be no delay," he said. In response to criticism, Lobão added, "We are on the right path, simply keeping the Brazilian energy matrix clean and renewable, as well as trusting our engineering talent."

The *Ministério de Minas e Energia* also emphasized that constructing the dam would not have any impact on any indigenous communities in Brazil. Still, the ministry's statements have not stopped protests. On June 3, just two days after the concession of the license by IBAMA, a group of indigenous leaders gathered in front of the city hall in the town of Colider, in the state of Mato Grosso, to protest construction of Belo Monte. The highlight of the demonstration was the presence of Kayapó leader Cacique Raoni, known internationally for his efforts to obtain the support of rock star Sting for the same cause in 1989. At that time, the Kayapó succeeded in putting a temporary halt to the project.

Even though Raoni's people have pledged to oppose the project in Brasília and have said they would even die fighting the dam construction, the nature of the project and the circumstances are different than they were in 1989, and it appears unlikely that they will succeed in stopping it this time around. While some environmentalists describe the project as "the death of Xingu," many other interests in Brazil support the project. The latter claim that the country must look at the big picture, whereby Brazil must continue to develop clean, renewable sources of energy to accelerate its growth.