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## **BRAZIL: PROJECT TO REDIRECT RIO SAO FRANCISCO GETS LICENSE DESPITE ENVIRONMENTAL OBJECTIONS**

The Brazilian government has obtained a license for a controversial project to redirect the flow of the Rio Sao Francisco in the northeastern part of the country. Environmental and religious activists have protested the project, worth billions of Brazilian reais, saying it could potentially kill the river, which runs principally through the states of Minas Gerais and Bahia to the Atlantic. The Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renovaveis (IBAMA) conceded a license to the government for the river-transposition project on March 23, although the license will not be the only hurdle the government must jump to begin the project.

### **Next step: Congress must approve and provide budget**

The license was for the first phase of the transposition project, which will entail works projects in the municipalities of Pernambuco, Ceara, Paraiba, and Rio Grande do Norte. The licensing is open to companies interested in executing civic works, installations, assembly, and tests and commissioning of mechanical and electrical equipment.

Reported estimated costs for the project vary, with numbers mentioned in the press ranging from 3.6 billion reais (US\$1.7 billion) to 6.5 billion reais (US\$3.2 billion). The IBAMA license covers a US\$2 billion phase of project.

The project to shift the course of one of the country's major rivers, a plan bitterly opposed by environmentalists, is meant to benefit some 12 million poor people by allowing large sections of the country's arid northeast to be irrigated. Congress must now approve funding for the project.

Under the plan, a new channel would be created for the Rio Sao Francisco, which runs approximately 2,600 km. In the country's northeastern region, the states of Bahia, Sergipe, Alagoas, and Minas Gerais, where the river currently runs, would become "donors" of the river's waters, which would be transported to the interior of Pernambuco, Ceara, Paraiba, and Rio Grande de Norte, all further north of where the river now drains into the ocean. But critics say the diversion would speed the river's flow toward the ocean, possibly causing it to dry up for periods of time.

"The license issued in a rush by IBAMA shows it wants to push the project through," said Luiz Claudio Mandela of Caritas, a Roman Catholic group opposing the project. "For us, it is clear this project is not viable."

Roman Catholic Bishop Luiz Flavio Cappio held an 11-day hunger strike in 2005 in an attempt to stop the project. He called it off after the federal government agreed to open the project to further discussions.

Minister of National Integration Geddel Viera Lima said the license did not mean work would start. "It is an advance, but it does not mean that works will be started. I cannot do anything while the Growth-Acceleration Program is not approved by Congress and the budget is not made available," he said.

## **Lula's dream, landless and indigenous activists' nightmare**

Viera Lima, newly sworn-in to his post, said the project would "transform into reality the dream of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva to bring water to the semi-arid region of the Northeast," a notorious site of impoverishment and Lula's home turf. "What we need to show is that this project will not harm anyone. Our grand challenge is to show that the project helps," said Viera Lima a week before IBAMA granted the license.

About 7,500 people invaded plots of government-owned land April 14 near Petrolina, 2,190 km north of Sao Paulo in Pernambuco state, said Cassia Bechara, a spokeswoman for the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST).

While the MST said 2,000 families took part, Pernambuco state authorities told local media only 800 families were camped out following the land invasions.

The MST said in a statement the protest was launched as thousands of rural workers were forced to leave their lands because of the diversion project. The MST also said the project gives agribusiness companies the best land, while poor rural workers will be left with unproductive areas.

### **The project was first proposed as far back as 1886.**

Indigenous people from across Brazil pitched black plastic tents in front of government buildings on April 16 to demand that officials discuss with them infrastructure projects they claim could have a negative impact on their ancestral lands.

About 1,500 Indians from 100 tribal groups, some in traditional dress, participated in the Free Land Encampment on the Esplanade of the Ministries, a grassy strip separating government agencies in the capital city of Brasilia.

Jecinaldo Cabral, of the Coordenacao das Organizacoes Indigenas da Amazonia Brasileira (COIAB), said government projects like dams and hydroelectric plants must be discussed with Indians because they could flood ancestral lands and destroy rivers and Indian fishing waters. Indigenous people also want to discuss government plans to divert the Rio Sao Francisco, he said.

Marcio Meira, who heads the Fundacao Nacional do Indio(FUNAI), said the Indians' point of view would always be taken into consideration and that his agency would make sure "the rights of Indians are always respected."

Also on April 16, about 800 members of the MST occupied the offices of the government's Instituto Nacional de Colonizacao e Reforma Agraria (INCRA) to protest the slow pace of land reform. The group said it wanted to call attention to the plight of 150,000 families of landless farmers camped on the margins of rural highways and on large estates waiting for the government to grant them deeds to land.

MST spokeswoman Tamara Menezes said the office takeover was "peaceful." The group is a household name across Brazil, famous for its large-scale, high-profile, occupations of land it

considers unproductive. Under Brazil's 1988 Constitution, unproductive land may be expropriated as long as the owner is compensated.

Religious and poor people's movements have conducted various demonstrations and road blockades to protest the Sao Francisco project, while federal Deputy Chico Lopes of the Partido Comunista do Brazil (PC do B) sought to rally a front of religious figures and residents of northeastern areas who would ostensibly benefit from the project in February.

### **Nation's rivers face drought threat**

The effort to redirect the Sao Francisco comes as Brazil faces future threats of drought that may lead to further decline in its rivers, most prominently in the Amazon River (see [NotiSur, 2006-02-17](#)). Meeting at Oxford University the last week of March, many of the world's leading experts on climate change and Amazonia were grappling with issues critical to the future climate of the world.

There was broad consensus that the 2005 drought was linked not to El Nino--the periodic phenomenon that begins with a warming of waters in the Pacific--as with most previous droughts in the Amazon, but to warming sea-surface temperatures in the tropical North Atlantic.

Peter Cox, professor in climate change dynamics at the University of Essex in the UK, thinks the same factors that caused the drought are likely to be repeated. What drives it, he says, is the warming of the North Atlantic Ocean in the Tropics relative to the South--this causes less rain to fall. "We can't say for sure that any individual drought...is caused by global warming--but we can say the probability of such an event will increase as a result of human-induced climate change," said Cox.

The Hadley Centre climate-change model predicts that, under current levels of greenhouse-gas emissions, the chances of such a drought would rise from 5% now (one every 20 years) to 50% by 2030, and to 90% by 2100.

The Hadley Centre model is one of several global-climate models (GCMs) attempting to predict weather changes in the Amazon. It is best known for warning of catastrophic losses of forest in the Amazon during a period of decades known as "forest dieback."

Other models show very different patterns of rainfall over the Amazon, but experts at the conference regarded the Hadley model as one of the more robust. "The Hadley Centre model does a credible job," says Carlos Nobre, the Brazilian chair of the International Geosphere-Biosphere program. "What all the GCMs predict is much greater variability in the weather, and the Hadley model captures that well."

### **Drinking water crisis to affect "41 million"**

In addition to river droughts, human access to drinking water poses a serious problem for Brazil's burgeoning population. The Agencia Nacional de Aguas (ANA) said in December 2006 that more than 70% of the cities with more than 5,000 residents in the northeast will confront a water-supply crisis by 2025, regardless of whether the Sao Francisco project goes through. The

ANA study found that 41 million people would lack water for human consumption given projected population-growth rates.

[Sources: BBC News, El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 03/23/07; Folha de Sao Paulo (Brazil), 12/21/06, 02/09/07, 02/15/07, 02/22/07, 02/27/07, 03/13/07, 03/15/07, 03/16/07, 03/23/07, 03/24/07; Associated Press, 03/23/07, 04/16/07]