

7-28-2000

## Brazil: Oil Spills Bring Calls For Accountability

NotiSur

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/la\\_energy\\_notien](https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/la_energy_notien)

---

### Recommended Citation

NotiSur. "Brazil: Oil Spills Bring Calls For Accountability." (2000). [https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/la\\_energy\\_notien/119](https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/la_energy_notien/119)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Latin American Energy Policy, Regulation and Dialogue at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in NotiEn: An Analytical Digest About Energy Issues in Latin America by an authorized administrator of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact [disc@unm.edu](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

## Brazil: Oil Spills Bring Calls For Accountability

After three damaging oil spills within ten days, environmentalists called for more accountability, especially from state-owned oil giant Petroleo Brasileiro (PETROBRAS). The latest rash of incidents followed a January spill from a broken PETROBRAS pipeline, which did extensive damage to the Guapimirim mangrove swamps in Guanabara Bay just north of Rio de Janeiro (see NotiSur, 2000-02-04). In the most serious of the latest spills, a pipeline at the Getulio Vargas Refinery in Araucaria burst and dumped more than 4 million liters of crude oil into the Barigui River, a tributary of the Iguacu River, on July 16. Officials called the spill the country's worst such disaster in the last 25 years and the worst oil spill ever to occur on a river.

The Iguacu River runs through Parana state in southern Brazil to Foz do Iguacu, near the border with Argentina and Paraguay. Brazilian Foreign Ministry officials contacted their counterparts in Argentina and Paraguay, assuring them that Brazil was making "every effort to prevent the petroleum from crossing the border." Local residents told Globo TV that the smell of oil was overwhelming and made it difficult to breathe. Officials were concerned the spill would affect drinking-water supplies in the state capital, Curitiba, where more than 1 million people live. Television images showed a completely blackened river winding through the countryside, with retention barriers holding back the slick. The region's wildlife, including more than 50 species of birds, 30 types of fish, and capybaras the world's largest rodent, was hard hit. Although Luiz Melo, an Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e Recursos Naturais Renovaveis (IBAMA) representative in Parana, said the recovery would take between two and three years, environmental organizations said vestiges of the damage would be felt for a least a decade. Company works to control damage PETROBRAS brought in 400 workers to place floating retention barriers and dig ditches off the river banks to divert oil, and it hired US cleanup specialists Clean Caribbean Cooperation to assist. PETROBRAS officials said on July 18 that its crews had succeeded in containing the spill near Balsa Nova, a town about 40 km downstream from the Getulio Vargas Refinery. But Jose Antonio Andreguetto, head of the Instituto Ambiental do Parana (IAP), said at least 20% of the slick had escaped the barriers. And cleanup workers acknowledged they would be unable to catch the entire spill. "There is no equipment in the world that can contain oil in a current faster than one knot," said Ricardo Brito, a PETROBRAS engineer and supervisor of the cleanup operations. He said the Iguacu's current was 4 knots, about 7.5 kph. Andreguetto said the spill had affected more than 10,000 riverside residents, as well as wildlife. "Plants and animals are significantly affected," he said. "The rehabilitation of the ecosystem will take a long time and will be very difficult." "Obviously there is a lot of worry," said Balsa Nova's town manager Eloi Alceu. "Even more worrying is that we won't know for a long time what the long-term effects are."

On July 19, the IAP banned fishing anywhere on the Iguacu River and its tributaries until further notice. Laboratory tests showed the river water was tainted by oil even after it was removed. On July 21, PETROBRAS blamed the spill on a worker who forgot to open a valve to let incoming oil flow in, and then a pipe joint that broke before the emergency pressure valve was triggered. "The conclusion points to both human and technical errors," a company spokesperson in Curitiba said. Government, environmentalists criticize PETROBRAS The state oil company has

become a target for environmentalists, who have stepped up demands that the government ensure that these incidents stop. The frequency of accidents should bring prison sentences for the firm's executives, as stipulated in the Environmental Crimes Act, said Joao Paulo Capobianco of the nongovernmental Socio-Environmental Institute. "PETROBRAS must answer for this," said Environment Minister Jose Sarney Filho. "This is absolute negligence." Oil workers accuse PETROBRAS of sacrificing safety to cut costs, postponing necessary maintenance measures. They said pumping should not resume until PETROBRAS puts preventive measures in place. The Getulio Vargas Refinery had cut its personnel from 1,200 to 580, said Helio Seidel, president of the local union. He said the company has failed to update equipment and technology, adding that the pipelines at the refinery are 23 years old, the same age as the plant. Complicated tasks are being performed by "workers who lack adequate training," said Mauricio Franca Rubem, head of the Sindicato dos Petroleiros. "That refinery lacks an emergency plan for this type of situation, personnel trained to act in case of accidents, and adequate equipment to clean up spills in the river," said Fernando Gabeira, a member of the environmental committee of the lower house in Congress. He added that PETROBRAS did not discover the spill for two hours after it began. The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) called on PETROBRAS to show how it will clean up and monitor the Iguacu River valley. It also called on the government to order an outside, independent review of the company's environmental safeguards. The WWF said that the Iguacu River runs through two important ecosystems of the Atlantic Forest and is home to many rare species of fish because of its isolation by the falls. "The areas are unique, with a high biodiversity, and are extremely endangered," the WWF said.

On July 24, the federal government fined PETROBRAS about US\$84 million and ordered the company to compensate riverside residents for damages. The Parana state government has separately fined the company US\$28 million. New spills cause further damage. Just when workers appeared to be gaining the upper hand in cleanup efforts, a train derailed on July 24, dumping 60,000 liters of gasoline into the Barigui river about 35 km from Curitiba. PETROBRAS officials said the barriers erected to contain the oil spill would capture the gasoline. The following day, environmental damage again hit the news with another spill threatening the beaches of Rio de Janeiro. The spill, discovered at the entrance to Guanabara Bay not far from Sugar Loaf Mountain, was apparently diesel fuel and spread a greasy film over 50 sq km of the water's surface. Officials estimated that about 400 liters had leaked into the bay. "The slick was probably caused by a tanker cleaning out its tanks," the spokeswoman said. "We won't be able to identify the responsible party for another 48 hours, though." PETROBRAS has joined cleanup efforts, but denies any responsibility for the spill. The slick was threatening the coastline around Sugar Loaf and had already damaged beaches in Niteroi, the city directly across Guanabara Bay from Rio de Janeiro. "It just shows that there aren't enough investments in prevention, environmental impact, and safety," said Delcio Rodrigues of the Brazilian branch of the international environmental group Greenpeace.

(Sources: Inter Press Service, The Miami Herald, 07/19/00; Notimex, 07/18/00, 07/19/00, 07/23/00; Associated Press, 07/17-20/00, 07/24/00; Spanish news service EFE, 07/18/00, 07/20-22/00, 07/24/00, 07/25/00; Reuters, 07/17-19/00, 07/21/00, 07/25/00, 07/26/00; CNN, 07/18/00, 07/19/00, 07/21/00, 07/23/00, 07/26/99)