

## Brazil's Indian Warriors Gather to Keep Amazon Waters Flowing Free

Written by Glenn Switkes

Wednesday, 16 July 2008 15:58

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For five days in May, hundreds of tribal people from the far reaches of the Amazon Basin came together to protest plans for huge dams on the Xingu River, the largest tributary of the Amazon. It was like being at a United Nations of indigenous peoples. Representatives from the Kayapó, Parakanã, Assurini and other indigenous groups arrived ceremonially dressed with genipapo (black) and urucum (red) bodypaint, and feather adornments. Some traveled as far as 1,000 miles to attend the meeting.

The indigenous peoples of the region viewed the meeting with officials in Altamira as a critical moment to present their position on the government's plans to flood their territories, and to describe the importance of the Xingu River system to their ways of life.

The emotionally charged encounter was filled with powerful moments. Every day, the indigenous groups entered and left with a dance and chant. Warriors armed with clubs and bows and arrows carried out rituals not usually seen outside their village ceremonies.

A Kayapó chief told a federal public attorney, "We want you as an authority of the government to tell President Lula that there will be world war in the Amazon if they try to build these dams."

Another Kayapó chief took his young son in his arms saying "We want to protect the Xingu for our children and grandchildren." Kayapó women bathed newborns in the waters of the Xingu, telling onlookers from the media and government, "This is why we are opposing the dams. We need clean water to drink and to bathe in. We need the Xingu River to have life."

### **New Offensive**

The crystalline waters of the Xingu River flow from central Brazil, through plateaus stripped for

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soy farms, into the native savannas and finally empty into the majesty of still-pristine rainforests. The forest still stands because this is indigenous territory, and indigenous warriors have repelled invaders for centuries.

More than 800 indigenous people from 26 ethnic groups and representatives of social movements from throughout the basin gathered in the Amazon town of Altamira for what was the largest indigenous gathering in the Amazon in nearly 20 years. The meeting marked the continuation of the determined opposition to dams, following an historic 1989 encounter in Altamira between the Kayapó and other indigenous groups, environmentalists, and the Brazilian government.

At that encounter, Tuirá, a Kayapó woman warrior, passed the blade of her machete along the cheek of José Muniz Lopes, who today is president of the state electric company Eletrobrás. As a result of indigenous resistance, the World Bank canceled a loan to the Brazilian electric power sector, setting back government plans to dam the Amazon for more than a decade.

Today, the Brazilian government is pushing ahead with new dams in the rainforest, including the gigantic Belo Monte Dam. If built, the Belo Monte Dam would be the world's third largest. Indigenous peoples are once again sounding the alarm and forming a united front against dams on the Xingu.

Despite the government's attempts to portray Belo Monte as a "better" alternative than previous plans for a series of dams on the river, indigenous representatives stated firmly that any intervention on the river would affect the fish stocks on which they depend for their survival.

Belo Monte would also dry out more than 100 km of the Xingu's "Big Bend," leaving their communities without fish, transportation, or a clean water supply, and providing a fertile breeding ground for insects that spread malaria, yellow fever, and other diseases. At least 16,000 people would have to be relocated if plans for the Belo Monte dam proceed.

The Brazilian government recently issued a new "hydroelectric inventory" for the Xingu that states that the proposed Belo Monte Dam is viable as a stand-alone dam without the need to build additional dams upstream. Based on this assessment, the survey concludes that construction of the Belo Monte could eliminate the need to flood indigenous territories upriver.

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But, given the Xingu's low flow rate during the dry season, experts and residents question the Belo Monte's hydroelectric capacity without the construction of additional dams upstream to store water and release it to the Belo Monte powerhouse during low-water periods. Upstream dams being studied could flood thousands of square kilometers of rainforest, including indigenous territories. Indigenous peoples meeting in Altamira clearly doubted the credibility of the government's statements.

The Kayapó Indians made it clear they will oppose all plans to dam the Xingu. In the meeting's most dramatic and frightening moment, the Kayapó became incensed at an Eletrobrás official's arrogant defense of dams on the Xingu, and his glib statements that the affected people's needs will be met by the National Indian Foundation, an agency that has done little to solve problems caused by past development projects and is now mired in corruption.

His speech prompted an angry response from Tuirá, who brandished her machete. A group of Kayapó men wrestled the official to the ground, tearing his shirt and wounding his arm with a machete. The Brazilian media splashed the images of the bloodied official across pages and TV screens throughout the country. Later, Tuirá explained, "We are defending the trees, the birds, the fish, and everything that lives in the river and the forests. We are going to continue to defend this, and we are going to bring this message to all the people of Brazil."

The aggressive act caused a horrified reaction among the 3,000 people in attendance and the Brazilian public. But its repercussions could go far beyond the media backlash to set a graver tone for the already fragile relationship between the Brazilian electric sector and the countless indigenous groups who would be affected by government plans to dam most of the major tributaries of the Amazon.

Recently, Brazil's energy planning director, Maurício Tolmasquim complained that hydroelectric plans are already suffering delays because indigenous peoples are not allowing engineers to enter their lands to survey potential dam sites.

Following the Altamira meeting, conflicts over dams on the Amazon are sure to intensify. Brazil's "Long-Range Energy Plan" counts on large dams as the overwhelming choice for expanding the nation's electricity supply. Tolmasquim's agency advises that Brazil will need to build an additional 100,000 Megawatts (MW) in additional hydroelectric generating capacity by the year 2030, roughly doubling its current installed capacity. New dams on the Amazon are slated to provide 80,000 MW of that energy. The agency calculates that two-thirds of the

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country's remaining hydro potential is located on the Amazon.

What this means is that 60 to 70 huge dams would be built in the rainforest over the next two decades on rivers such as the Xingu, Madeira, Araguaia, Tocantins, Tapajós, and Trombetas. Government estimates are that 40% of these will "interfere" with indigenous reserves or protected areas.

But its estimations fall short, since they only consider lands that would be flooded by the dams. In reality, nearly all the new dams will have serious implications for the indigenous peoples of Amazônia. Projections and past experience indicate that the dam projects could decimate the fish stocks that are the staple of their diets. The megaprojects also would require building roads into previously remote areas, which leads to deforestation and an influx of thousands of migrant workers in search of employment.

### "Cheap" Energy

All this increases the already intense pressure on forests and fauna, and provides incentives for new hubs of industrial development. Public services in Amazon cities and towns would be stretched thin as new migrants increase the demand for hospitals, water and sewage services. Bars, prostitution, and drug use would spread. This has been the pattern in areas surrounding megaprojects such as Tucuruí Dam and the Carajás Iron Mine.

Hydroelectric reservoirs in the Amazon would also emit significant quantities of greenhouse gases, principally methane, contributing to global warming. Philip Fearnside from Brazil's National Institute for Amazon Research published a study showing that the greenhouse effect of emissions from the Curuá-Una dam in Pará, Brazil in 1990 was more than 3.5 times what would have been produced by generating the same amount of electricity from oil. Studies at other tropical dams show that greenhouse gas emissions frequently exceed those of combined-cycle natural gas plants.

Despite the environmental and social impacts, there are clear signs that the government intends to ram through its projects to dam the Amazon, no matter what the cost. The Santo Antônio and Jirau dams on the Madeira River were granted an environmental license despite the objections of technical experts in the environmental protection agency, Ibama.

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Marabá Dam on the Tocantins River, now in the licensing process, would require the involuntary resettlement of more than 40,000 people - the largest expulsion of Brazilians since the days of the military dictatorship of the 1970s. Marabá would flood the Gavião indigenous peoples' reserve, and another dam given priority by the government, Serra Quebrada, would flood the most fertile lands of the Apinajé indigenous group.

These projects and others can expect to be challenged in the courts, principally by attorneys of the Federal Public Ministry, a cross between the U.S. Attorney General's office and public-interest legal advocates. The federal attorneys are a major thorn in the side of the Brazilian electric sector, so much so they were criticized recently in a World Bank study on problems in hydroelectric dam licensing in the Amazon as being "too autonomous" and in holding up projects that the Bank recommended be fast-tracked through the approval process.

The displacement of entire communities, lack of consultation with indigenous peoples, and environmental destruction in the name of progress is all taking place under a "popular" government that has carefully avoided any public debate about Brazil's energy future. No longer is it a question of whether Brazil will build dams or nuclear or coal-burning plants. Lula has made it clear that as a broker for the commercial and political interests of a group of political bosses who have been associated for decades with corruption in large infrastructure projects, he intends to build dams and nukes and polluting coal plants.

The government has decided that dam construction must go forward, and as a former president of the state company Eletrobrás argued, environmentalists can't be allowed to "bring Brazil to a halt." Large hydropower is still considered the "cheapest" alternative for Brazil's energy needs, and will continue to be if the government keeps subsidies flowing to large dam projects.

Brazil's National Social and Economic Development Bank (BNDES) recently lowered interest rates and extended repayment periods for dams within Lula's Growth Acceleration Plan, or PAC. Money is being drawn from the Workers' Unemployment Fund and public pension funds and channeled to private companies interested in building dams in the Amazon. Transnational companies such as Suez have embraced the liberal terms for loans and are expanding their plans for dam building in Amazônia.

Brazil has diverse alternatives to dams, including wind, biomass, and solar options, as well as improved energy efficiency, retrofitting old dams, and cutting wasteful transmission line losses. But these would not generate as much in private-sector contracts, bribes and corruption as

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megaprojects like Belo Monte, which could end up costing US\$ 10 billion or more. Scandals have recently surfaced involving payoffs from equipment manufacturers to land lucrative dam deals, and several upper-level former electric sector officials have been indicted on racketeering charges for manipulating public bids for infrastructure works.

Meanwhile, deforestation in Amazônia continues to rise exponentially, and the Lula government fiddles while the forests burn. Soy plantations, sugarcane fields for ethanol; more mines, more aluminum foundries, and the planned network of dams together serve as the engine for the commoditization of the rainforest and systematically destroy one of the planet's few remaining lungs.

### **Resistance to Dams Grows**

In this context, the Xingu gathering provided an important platform for building broad-based resistance to the Amazon's destruction. Idalino Nunes de Assis, of the Rural Workers' Union in Porto de Moz, said at the meetings conclusion, "The Xingu is our life, our country, our home, the source of our food, our drinking water, and our way of life. We need to join forces - riverbank dwellers, indigenous peoples, forest gatherers, quilombolas (descendants of escaped African slaves) and people in the cities - so the Xingu will not be condemned to death. They want to dam our Xingu to privatize it."

Dom Erwin Krautler, Bishop of the Xingu, told the crowd, "Indigenous peoples think of their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren - they make the bridge between their ancestors and future generations. Whites often act as if they were the last generation before the flood. The Amazon has a huge heart, and everyone fits inside - the indigenous peoples, traditional populations, and more recent immigrants. We are in this fight together."

The final declaration of the Altamira meeting, called the "Xingu Forever Alive Letter," spoke with a united voice against all dams, large and small, on the Xingu and its tributaries.

"Our culture, our spirituality, and our survival are deeply rooted in the Xingu, and we depend on it for our existence ... We, who have protected our Xingu River do not accept the invisibility with which they wish to impose decisions upon us, nor the way we are treated with disdain by public officials ... We demand respect."

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What sticks in my mind from this remarkable meeting is a sense of determination, and unyielding commitment on the part of indigenous people to protect the Xingu. It is a feeling that was not dimmed by the violence, or by the media backlash orchestrated by the government.

Hope is alive on the raging rapids of the Xingu, and the spirit of the rainforest is reflected in the eyes of the people who draw their lives from its bountiful waters.

### **For More Information**

Xingu Forever Alive Letter

English: <http://internationalrivers.org/en/node/2910>

International Rivers Dams sites:

English: <http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/latin-america/brazilian-dams>

Portuguese: <http://www.internationalrivers.org/en/am%C3%A9rica-latina/hidrel%C3%A9tricas-no-brasil>

IRN Xingu Encounter site, with video:

<http://www.internationalrivers.org/blog-categories/681>

World Bank's "Environmental Licensing of Hydroelectric Projects in Brazil: Contributing to the Debate"

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<http://www.worldbank.org/>

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