

# Brazil's Native Peoples and the Belo Monte Dam: A Case Study



Indigenous and peasant Brazilians protest the Belo Monte dam project in April. The dam will cause incalculable social and environmental damage.

By Sara Diamond and Christian Poirier

FUELED BY AMPLE NATURAL RESOURCES, BRAZIL'S economy has soared in the last seven years under the helm of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. As a part of its GDP growth strategy, the Lula government has prioritized large-scale infrastructure development with its Accelerated Growth Program (PAC)—a public-private partnership to fund the expansion of Brazil's transport, energy, sanitation, and housing infrastructure, launched in 2007. The Brazilian Finance Ministry attributed Brazil's recently increasing GDP growth (from 4% in

2006 to 6.1% in 2007, 5.1% in 2008) to the program's success.<sup>1</sup>

Belo Monte, a proposed hydroelectric dam in the Xingu River Basin of the Amazonian rainforest, is the PAC's flagship project. Belo Monte is the world's largest dam complex in development, and if completed it will be the world's third-largest dam, after China's Three Gorges Dam and the joint Brazilian-Paraguayan dam Itaipu.<sup>2</sup> The Belo Monte project will divert the flow of the Xingu River, a massive, 1,700-mile tributary of the Amazon that stretches from the savannas of

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An Arara woman and her child on the banks of the Xingu River near the Amazonian town of Altamira, Brazil

the western state of Mato Grosso to the northern jungles of Pará. Operating at full capacity, the dam will generate up to 11,233 megawatts, with most of the electricity going to local mining operations before being routed to the metropolitan areas of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, about 1,800 miles away.

The Brazilian government has mounted a powerful propaganda campaign to convince its citizens and the world that this \$30 billion megadam, funded almost entirely by Brazil's National Development Bank, is a sustainable way to fuel continued economic growth and human development. Moreover, the government argues that the dam is a model of "green," renewable energy, based on the premise that it will flood a relatively small area of surrounding forest and produce large amounts of electricity with fewer emissions

than a generator powered by fossil fuels. Excluded from the public discussion, however, has been the incalculable social and environmental destruction that the dam threatens to wreak on the Xingu River Basin, a global center of biodiversity that supports an extensive network of tributaries, primary forests, and some 25,000 indigenous people from 18 ethnic groups.

The dam will divert more than 80% of the Xingu River's flow through two massive canals, flooding more than 193 square miles of forest and part of the city of Altamira, while a 62-mile stretch of the river known as the Big Bend will be left in permanent drought. This is expected to cause a significant decline in the water table, leading to substantial losses of aquatic and terrestrial fauna. The dam threatens to devastate the surrounding rainforest ecosystem and will



displace between 20,000 and 40,000 people, both rural and urban, destroying their livelihoods with little or no compensation.

In addition to the hundreds of riverine communities, about 800 people from the Juruna, Xikrin, Arara, Xipaia, Kuruaya, Kayapó, and other indigenous ethnicities in the surrounding region will no longer be able to depend on the river for survival. Receding waters would make it impossible for local communities to travel by boat to sell their produce or buy staples. Upstream communities, including the Kayapó, would lose migratory fish species essential to their diet. And for the peoples who call the river basin home—from the Kayapó of the upper reaches of the Xingu's tributaries to the Arara, who live alongside its waterways—the Big Bend is the cradle of civilization. The word *Xingu* means “house of God” to indigenous groups, and its destruction will represent nothing less than a cosmological catastrophe to them.

Despite these concerns, which have been publicly aired by the people who live near the dam project, by experts in numerous fields, and even by some dissident government administrators, the official line has not budged. At a press conference in February, after the Belo Monte project was granted an environmental license, Minister of Environment Carlos Minc flat out rejected the criticisms. “Not a single Indian will be displaced,” Minc said. He conceded only that the peoples of the Xingu will be “indirectly affected.”<sup>3</sup>

**E**VEN AS THE LULA GOVERNMENT HAS PURSUED Belo Monte and other megaprojects, it has postured itself as concerned with sustainability, conservation, and indigenous rights. At the beginning of his presidency, Lula appointed ex-rubber tapper Marina Silva as head of the Ministry of the Environment, where she organized local River Basin Committees to help manage water resources. And in 2007 Brazil voted for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP), which guarantees the right to self-determination, including free, prior, and informed consent, for projects that affect their communities. But despite these and other steps, the Lula government has on balance perpetuated the Brazilian state's history of violating indigenous rights and ignoring environmental conservation in the name of progress.

The Lula government's efforts to portray itself as sensitive to indigenous rights draw on a recent history of reforms and legal commitments beginning with the creation of the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) in 1967. An entire governmental department dedicated to protecting the interests of indigenous people, FUNAI was founded after a scandalous 5,000-page report commissioned by

the Ministry of the Interior revealed systemic persecution of indigenous peoples in Brazil, including torture, slavery, sexual abuse, land theft, and even the complete extermination of 80 tribes. The military government created FUNAI in part as a public relations effort to construct a humanitarian, “racially democratic” image.<sup>4</sup> It was no accident, however, that the newly birthed FUNAI was an agency of the Ministry of the Interior, whose principal mission was to exploit Brazil's natural resources. FUNAI immediately adopted a policy of protection by assimilation, encouraging communities to give up traditional ways of life in order to join mainstream culture—in short, freeing up native lands by eliminating cultural diversity.

After the return to democracy, Brazil's 1988 Constitution included several hard-won provisions guaranteeing indigenous rights. The most important of these was Article 231, which recognized both the cultural and territorial rights of indigenous peoples based on their heritage, establishing their right to permanently live in traditional territories, and guaranteeing the exclusive use of natural resources necessary for securing their cultural integrity and physical well-being. In 1989, Brazil ratified Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization, which entitled indigenous peoples to participate in the decision-making process of infrastructural development in their territories and codified their right to be fully consulted before exploration or exploitation activities begin.

Although the 1988 constitutional provisions were an important gain for indigenous cultural independence and property rights, the enforcement of these rights remains tenuous and often contingent on external political leverage. Because of this, Belo Monte's development process and that of other infrastructure projects have been alarmingly deficient in fulfilling the state's legal obligations to indigenous peoples. Leaders from the Xingu River Basin have made it clear that their right to consultation on Belo Monte as spelled out in the Constitution, UNRIP, and ILO 169 has not been honored.

José Carlos Arara of the Arara people on the Xingu's Big Bend, for example, has denounced the government's claims that he and other leaders took part in an official meeting with the government regarding Belo Monte, as mandated by the licensing process. He even has video footage of government officials stating that their 2009 meeting with local leadership was an unofficial consultation, clearly promising that an official audience would take place. In total, only four public hearings were held on Belo Monte, offering little or no access to the remote populations who stand to be most affected by the project. In addition, security forces impeded the entrance of civil



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society representatives to the hearings, and the few public queries that were voiced were dismissed, ridiculed, and evasively answered.

Belo Monte has violated almost all the articles of UNDRIP, especially those that detail rights to full consultation and participation (including veto power) in development projects that are on or affect indigenous territories, or that affect indigenous cultural practices or survival. Brazil has furthermore violated Article 231.3, Chapter VIII, of its own Constitution, which guarantees indigenous peoples' right to challenge the exploitation of water resources on their lands. And despite laws and policies promising environmental protection and community participation, Brazil's official environmental impact assessments (EIA), which is required for the Belo Monte project to receive a construction license, has received harsh criticism from national and international experts. The EIA barely covers even the minimum amount of information required by Brazilian legislation.<sup>5</sup>

A specialist panel of 40 independent international experts analyzed the 2009 EIA in response to a request from social justice and environmental watchdog groups in the Altamira region. The panel determined that processes at public hearings were forced and accelerated, while the little information made available to the public was both misleading and incomplete. The EIA itself provided insufficient studies and analysis of the dam's impact on sedimentation and the water table, did not include the likely effects upon aquatic mammals or the probability of deforestation in the greater region, and blatantly omitted any analysis of the cultural, social, or economic impacts on communities downstream. The panel also concluded that the EIA also contained numerous quantitative inaccuracies and methodological inconsistencies, including overestimations of energy generation, underestimations of the size of the affected rural population, and severe negligence in the overall evaluation of health and environmental risks, and water security. The panel also determined that at least two indigenous areas should be added in the list of directly affected areas because the dam will cut off river flow in the Paquiçamba and the Arara do Maia reserves.

Several Brazilian administrators have also raised concerns about the Belo Monte project. Two senior officials at the government's environmental agency IBAMA, Leozildo Tabajara da Silva Benjamin and Sebastião Custódio Pires, resigned in 2009, citing high-level political pressure to ap-

prove the project. In April, Judge Antonio Carlos de Almeida Campelo suspended the dam's preliminary license, writing in his decision that "it remains proven, unequivocally, that Belo Monte's plant will exploit the hydroelectric potential of areas occupied by indigenous people who would be directly affected by the construction and development of the project." Campelo filed three injunctions against Belo Monte's license, but they were quickly dismissed by a higher court. In June, Campelo was removed from ruling on environmental cases altogether in an administrative maneuver.<sup>6</sup>

"The Lula government is clearly pressuring the courts to approve Belo Monte against the rights and interests of indigenous people and the local populations of the Xingu, yet it is our lives at stake," said Sheyla Yakarepi Juruna, a leader of the Juruna people. "Even so, the people affected by this dam are united and determined to stop the project, we will not give up this fight."<sup>7</sup>

Belo Monte will be funded almost entirely by Brazil's National Development Bank (BNDES), which is linked to Brazil's Ministry of Development, Industry and Foreign Trade (MDIC) and is bankrolled by Brazil's workers' pension and treasury funds.<sup>8</sup> The primary financier of government development initiatives, BNDES is expected to finance up to 80% of Belo Monte's costs, which could exceed \$30 billion. As a public institution, BNDES has received persistent criticism for its lack of transparency and public participation in its lending process and has few, if any, social or environmental safeguards for its projects.<sup>9</sup>

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**T**HE INDIGENOUS GROUPS THROUGHOUT THE XINGU RIVER basin—including the Kayapó, Arara, Juruna, and Xipaia tribes—have consistently and adamantly spoken out against government plans to build the Bleo Monte dam. Indigenous leaders have repeatedly promised to lay down their lives to defend the river upon which they depend for survival. On April 23, Kayapó groups began a monthlong blockade of the BR-80 highway where it crosses the Xingu River, disrupting a major transport artery for commercial goods. In a May 1 interview with the French channel TF1, Chief Raoni of the Kayapó said, "I have asked my warriors to prepare for war, and I have spoken of this with other tribes from the upper Xingu. We will not let them [build this dam]."

The state-run electric company Electronorte has attempted to buy off some Xingu-area peoples with a finan-



cial compensation package in exchange for their public support for the project. In reality, this “compensation” package is composed of services that are already constitutionally guaranteed to indigenous people, yet are treated by Electronorte and the media as handouts because of a lack of public information. There have also been threats that social services will be withdrawn entirely from communities that continue to oppose the Belo Monte project. This has effectively fractured a previously united indigenous resistance to the dam, and the Xicrim people—citing fears of retaliation, cutoff services, and no compensation for their communities—have refused to participate in further resistance activities or dialogues.

After a June 4 meeting of leaders from 10 indigenous nations, Kayapó leader Megaron Txucarramãe stated: “I am sad and angry, not angry with our indigenous brothers, but I am angry with the government, with Electronorte, who worked to fool them, using money to pit us against each other, demobilizing our struggle against Belo Monte. We have decided not to fight and rather to step back and converse among ourselves. We are not going to fight with our brothers. We will ask the NGOs to help us go to Brasília to speak with Lula; that is what the leaders agreed here.”

José Carlos Arara explained, “Our ancestors are there inside this land, our blood is inside the land, and we have to pass on this land with the story of our ancestors to our children. We don’t want to fight, but we are ready to fight for our land if we are threatened. We want to live on our land in peace with all that we have there.”

But contrary to promises made in the media and in the Brazilian constitution, neither Lula nor other government officials have been willing to speak with indigenous groups in any formal setting to discuss Belo Monte, impacts of its construction, or residents’ concerns. Instead of enforcing its own laws, Brazil prefers to turn a blind eye, just as miners, ranchers, and developers have ignored all indigenous constitutional protections. Even more chilling, plans have already been developed for over 100 new dams in the region.

Part of the larger problem is that Brazil’s indigenous peoples still have ambiguous legal standing. It remains unclear if indigenous individuals—historically ascribed a unique position as statutory minors, or “wards of the state”—can even claim citizenship. This has encouraged persistent discrimination by the non-indigenous community, and has allowed corporate and economic interests to take priority in the development and management of indigenous lands. Moreover, linguistic and geographical barriers, together with unfamiliarity with the political system, have led indigenous Brazilians to depend heavily

upon outside mediators to defend their rights, a situation that continues today.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, environmentalists and indigenous groups formed partnerships to protect native lands and to fight against environmentally devastating development projects. Support from local and international civil society gave Brazilian indigenous leaders a new independence from FUNAI, and an opportunity to take grievances directly to international supporters and a global audience. Attention from *Avatar* director James Cameron and two of its stars, Sigourney Weaver and Joel David Moore, has renewed a global interest in the plight of indigenous people in Brazil today. And this time around, the stakes are higher than ever before. Unfortunately, mainstream Brazilian media and many government officials perpetuate conspiracy theories that indigenous rights are simply a strategy for foreign control of Brazilian natural resources.

This support enabled the successful resistance against the first Xingu dams more than 20 years ago. The Kayapó of the Upper Xingu Basin, who had prior success advocating for the removal of illegal gold miners and loggers from their lands, were among the most vocal indigenous opponents of the government’s original plans to dam the Xingu, known then as the Kararôã project. In 1988, two Kayapó leaders flew to Washington and spoke directly to officials at the World Bank, the U.S. Treasury, and Congress about the dam project. In 1989, dozens of indigenous nations came together for the Conference of Indigenous Peoples of the Xingu, staging a protest in Altamira to demand that the Xingu River remain free of dams. Their steadfast resistance, together with broad-based international support, contributed to the World Bank’s decision to suspend Brazil’s first power-sector loan in 1989, forcing the government to postpone the Kararôã dam complex.

**T**HE ARGUMENTS FOR BUILDING THE BELO MONTE DAM DO not begin to justify the true costs of its construction, nor do they hide the Brazilian government’s hypocrisy in pursuing expedited development and permitting processes while paying lip service to indigenous rights and environmental conservation. The Belo Monte dam project defies constitutional and international policies, and will have devastating, permanent social and environmental consequences. The fight to stop Belo Monte and conserve the Xingu region is critical to preserving indigenous cultural identity and to ensuring fair treatment in future land management and developmental activities. Slated for completion in 2015, the dam will likely continue to be a source of conflict in the Amazon in the months and years ahead. ■



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