

New Dams in Brazil Keep on Destroying Communities and Lives

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Until the end of the 1990's, 4,500 rural families lived on the banks of the Paraíba River. They lived in humble but dignified conditions. Their houses were made of adobe, they ate what they planted on the fertile soil, they got their water from the river, and they had access to education, health and recreation - public services available to them in the municipalities of Itatuba, Natube and Aroeiras in the state of Paraíba, in Brazil's Northeast.

All of this ended when Brazil's federal and state governments decided to dam up the river in order to make a reservoir. This changed the lives of these families forever. And it is easy to say if it was for the better or not.

Today in Brazil there are no laws which define and establish the rights of those who are affected by the building of dams. There is not even a public office charged with issuing payments for land and resettling those whose homes and lives are destroyed.

Thus, there are many cases of injustice and violation of human rights in the process of installing a dam. The case of the Acauã Dam is one of the worst in the country.

The families who were affected by the construction of the dam were moved to "agrovilas," which really were villas without the agriculture. The villa is simply a set of identical houses placed in what is essentially a desert, lacking the most basic conditions for decent human living - there are no public services nor is there means by which the families can return to their productive lives.

MAB (Movement of those Affected by Dams) has denounced the situation to officials, and according to Osvaldo Bernardo da Silva, the MAB state coordinator in Paraíba, the families are not even able to plant and have come to depend on government food for survival:

"The only way the people have been able to survive is through persistence. After various protests and public audiences, MAB was able to secure government food and cisterns for the families."

The government's Special Defense Commission for Human Rights visited the resettlement project of those affected by the Acauã Dam last year, and presented a report confirming the denouncements MAB had made. They suggested emergency measures to be taken by the federal and state governments. Until today, not one measure has been taken.

The Federal Public Ministry of Paraíba has filed a civil lawsuit against the Union for not conferring means of livelihood that the inhabitants had possessed before the dam.

"This situation, of thousands of people being thrown into these housing projects in the middle of nowhere, making it impossible for them to engage in any productive activity, urgently demands the adoption of measures that may support the most elementary of necessities (food, school, pre-school, public health, public transportation, public security, recreation) for those being relocated until the governmental obligation to confer to these families a sustainable means of living is completed," argued the Public Ministry.

Acauã is not an isolated case. In all states, those affected by dams are at the mercy of the dam company owners who are interested only in profit and not human rights. In Acauã, there is much tension over the many injustices suffered. But those families have not given up, and are ready to struggle for their rights.

Jornal do MAB