

In Brazil, Police Intimidation Prevents Debates on Indians Interests

Contributed by Newsroom
Thursday, 03 March 2005

A meeting was arranged for February 17 to discuss the project for the transposition of the São Francisco river involving the participation of Brazil's Ministry for National Integration, which proposed the project, the Truká and Tumbalalá peoples, and the city hall of the municipality of Cabrobó, which lies 630 km from Recife.

This event, which was to have taken place in Cabrobó, never happened. In the morning, the Pernambuco Military Police, through Ciosac (the Caatinga Area Independent Operations and Survival Company), was on the bridge that lies between the Truká land and the city of Cabrobó, which are separated by the São Francisco river.

According to the indigenous leaders and the Cabrobó city hall, the police searched and demanded to see the documents of the indigenous people who tried to reach the city. The police only went away after a state deputy intervened.

The Grande Rio TV station, the local affiliate of the Globo TV network, broadcast a report saying that the meeting had been cancelled on safety grounds.

The Truká chief, Aurivan dos Santos, said that "other indigenous people who were at the place where the meeting was to have been held told us that there had also been many police there."

According to the Truká chief, "they want to give the impression that it is the people that are being intransigent. But we want the debate to go ahead."

The roughly 250 indigenous people who were going to the meeting decided not to go to the city. As a gesture of solidarity the Cabrobó city hall decided to cancel the meeting.

The indigenous people question the fact that they were not formally consulted by the federal government about the project. Their fear, with respect to these large projects, concerns the impact of the dams to be built in the river, especially the Sobradinho, Xingo and Itaparica dams.

"They have made more than 20 species of fish disappear from the river, along with birds and medicinal plants. In my grandfather's time, when there were no dams, we practically lived off fish, sugar cane, cassava and potatoes.

"As we no longer have this, we have had to adapt to agriculture. If this transposition comes about, we will once again have to adapt. Our concern is for our children who should not suffer the impact that we have suffered," said the Truká chief.

The Tumbalalá, consisting of about 3000 indigenous people, who live on the left hand bank of the River São Francisco, in the state of Bahia, were not mentioned in the environmental impact report (EIA-RIMA) presented by the Ministry for National Integration (MI).

Representatives of the Tumbalalá were at the public hearings held in Salvador, state of Bahia, and in Salgueiro, state of Pernambuco. The leader Maria José Tumbalalá tells us that, before the dams, the agriculture of her people was based on the seasonal changes in the river, which fertilized the lands around its banks during the floods.

"The floods fertilized the land. When the water receded, we planted cassava, manioc and sugar cane; we produced honey and sweet potatoes. Ever since the Sobradinho dam has held back the water, there have been no more floods, there has been only erosion," said Maria José.

"Our economy was based around this agriculture. Nowadays, almost nothing is being planted because the people cannot afford to pay for the energy to run an electric pump or a motor," she added.

The indigenous people also question the MI's discourse, which says that actions to revitalize the river are already underway. "We want them to show us where this revitalization has taken place, because we haven't seen any improvement work in Cabrobó," said Maria José.

According to the press office of the Ministry of Cities, which is responsible for approving improvement projects and for controlling the funds which have been announced as being intended for the revitalization of the River São Francisco, there has been no money set aside for improvement work in the municipality of Cabrobó.

There is a programmed investment of around US\$ 50,000 for the city of Salgueiro, which is in the same region, for a sanitary drainage system for only one road. This has existed since 2003.

The indigenous people claim that holding the water back can cause one of the branches of the river, which they call Pequeno (Small) river and banks the Assunção Island, to dry up.

The license to carry out a project of this type needs to be approved by the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (Ibama).

This institution has arranged eight hearings in different cities in the Northeast and the State of Minas Gerais. Four of these were held, whereas the other four did not take place because of protests from groups who were unhappy with the way in which the process has been managed by the federal authorities.

According to the MI press office, Brazilian legislation lays down that at least one public hearing must take place before the analysis of the preliminary environmental license. Now, it is up to Ibama to decide if further hearings are to be arranged or if those that have taken place are sufficient for the environmental institution to come to a decision.

Peoples of Roraima

Leaders of the Ingaricó, Macuxi, Patamona, Taurepang, Sapará, Wapichana, Wai Wai and Yanomami peoples met between February 12 and 15 to evaluate and decide on the direction to be taken by the indigenous movement in Roraima, during the 34th Gathering of the Indigenous People of that state.

186 indigenous communities, the Association of the Indigenous Peoples of Roraima, the Organization of the Indigenous Women of Roraima, the Organization of the Indigenous Teachers of Roraima, TWM (Society for the Community Development and Environmental Quality of the Taurepang, Wapichana and Macuxi) and the St. Marcos Project were represented.

The gathering discussed how to ensure respect for the indigenous territories in Roraima and in the final declaration from the meeting (read the full document on the Cimi website), the leaders restated their worries about the advance of the land-grabbers and the declarations by the authorities concerning the negotiations to deal with the Raposa/Serra do Sol boundaries.

"These declarations cause fear and concern, because the indigenous lands are, by definition, unavailable and non-transferable and they cannot, therefore, be the object of political negotiations, leaving the indigenous people vulnerable to pressure from those who have an interest in the appropriation and exploitation of the natural resources that exist there. Rights are to be acknowledged!" they said.

The document also covers the action of the rice farmers who "continue to expand into the interior of the Raposa/Serra do Sol indigenous territory, destroying the soil and polluting the rivers with chemical fertilizers and pesticides."

At the beginning of 2004, a Working Group was set up with representatives of federal institutions and indigenous organizations to bring those who infringe the environmental legislation to court and take measures to counter pollution, but the group was disbanded without any measures ever being taken.

"The dismantling of this working group and consequent paralysis of the environmental inspection institutions are the fruit of an illegitimate agreement between the federal government and political sectors in Roraima that are linked to these rice farmers."

The document also exposes that the trash from the towns of Uiramutã, Pacaraima, Taiano and Cantá is dumped in or around indigenous lands.

Health Care and Education were other subjects dealt with, and the final document gives recommendations and demands for all the issues.

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