

## Lula's and Pope's Emissaries Try to End Brazilian Bishop's Hunger Strike

Contributed by Nelson Motta  
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The head of the Brazilian Secretariat of Institutional Relations, Minister Jaques Wagner, is on his way to the municipality of Cabrobó, in the backlands of the northeastern state of Pernambuco, where he is scheduled to meet with a local bishop, Dom Luiz Flávio Cappio.

The Franciscan religious has been on a hunger strike for 11 days protesting the government's transbasin diversion project for the São Francisco River, claiming that it will not benefit the poor who live in the region. Wagner is accompanied by the nuncio of Brazil, Dom Lorenzo Baldisseri.

"We are willing to sit down with the bishop and talk this over. We want to remove his doubts and answer his questions about what we are doing. I think we will be able to end the hunger strike with a good conversation," said the Minister. Wagner added that he will invite Cappio to come to Brasília and meet President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva.

Also according to Wagner, Minister of National Integration, Ciro Gomes, who is actually running the diversion project, has said he is also willing to talk to the bishop and provide him with any necessary explanations about the project.

The São Francisco River flows 2,700 kilometers, through five states, but has never been really important because it flows through a poor, under-populated area of the country's Northeast region.

The São Francisco transbasin diversion project has been designed to consist of two canals which would carry water into the center of Brazil's drought-prone semi-arid Northeast.

One of the canals will head north carrying water into the states of Ceará and Rio Grande do Norte. The other canal will head east carrying water into the states of Pernambuco and Paraíba. The total amount of water carried in the canals is to be approximately 1% of what the river carries to sea.

According to the government, the project is much more than a diversion of river water. It is a wide-ranging revitalization program for the whole of the São Francisco basin region that will include recovery of areas destroyed by erosion, improvement in water quality, recuperation and protection of natural flora and water sources, water and sewage treatment, environmental oversight and the creation of tourism and recreational centers along the river. Estimated total cost is R\$ 4.5 billion. The project budget for this year is R\$ 624 million.

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