

Pope Intercedes and Brazilian Bishop Ends Hunger Strike

Contributed by Alessandra Bastos
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Bishop Dom Luiz Flávio Cappio ended his 11-day hunger strike after a meeting with the head of the Secretariat of Institutional Relations, Minister Jaques Wagner. The bishop was protesting against the transbasin diversion project of the São Francisco River.

The government committed to further analyze the project.

The bishop's hunger strike attracted international attention. Pope Benedict XVI sent him a letter, which was personally handed by Dom Lorenzo Baldisseri, apostolic nuncio to Brazil.

Baldisseri went to the northeastern municipality of Cabrobó to meet the bishop, accompanying the Minister, Thursday, October 6. The content of the letter was not made available to the press, however.

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 Brazilian 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.

The project also envisions 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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