

# Brazilian Rains Kill Dozens and Broken Dam Leaves Thousands Without Shelter

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Heavy rains in southeastern Brazil have already killed at least 37 people since the beginning of the year. Now the collapse of bauxite mining company Rio Pomba Cataguases' dam, in the state of Minas Gerais, has dumped 2 billion liters (528 gallons) of mud, and possibly aluminum and bauxite in rivers that serve water to several towns near the Rio de Janeiro - Minas Gerais border.

More than 12,000 had to leave their homes in Minas. Now, Cedae (Rio's Water and Sewage State Company) has been monitoring the advance of the contaminated water to Rio cities like Laje do Muriaé, São José de Ubá and Itaperuna, which have together about 90,000 residents.

The mayor of Laje do Muriaé has already declared state of emergency. Rio's authorities are sending water tank trucks to the area since people will not be able to use the water until the river can be cleaned up.

According to Cedae's analyses the dirty water is 200 times muddier than normal. The degree of impurity is so big that there is no way the liquid can be treated for human consumption.

The dam collapse occurred Wednesday morning, January 10. The disaster caused the overflow of the Fubá river and the flooding of Mirai, the Minas Gerais city where the mining company is located.

Authorities haven't assessed yet the number of people who had their homes flooded by the muddy waters, but it's estimated that some 3,000 have become homeless due to the disaster. Those affected by the cataclysm who couldn't find a place to stay with friends and relatives have been taken to the city council where they are being given clothes, mattresses and food baskets.

Most of those exposed to the waters lost everything they had inside the house. In Muriaé the presence of dead fish led the population to fear that the water has been contaminated with bauxite even though according to the mining company all there is in the water is clay

Trucks and tractors from the Minas Gerais Rural Foundation are helping with the cleanup. The population has also been given cleaning material to remove the mud of their streets and homes. Copasa, Minas's sanitation company, is also making available its water tank trucks.

There will also be plenty of work for the DER, the roads department. Teams of the DER are already evaluating the situation to repair and possibly rebuild roads and bridges destroyed by the dam collapse.

The Minas Gerais Environment secretary, José Carlos Carvalho, has announced that the Rio Pomba Cataguases company will not be allowed to rebuild the dam and it will be fined US\$ 35 million (75 million reais).

Wagner Victor, Ceda's president, applauded Minas Gerais decision to close the guilty mining company and asked exemplary punishment for their owners: "We hope that, besides closing the company, their owners, who are outlaws, will be arrested and put behind bars."

This is the third time since 2003 that a company's dam gives way. In 2003, another dam broke down and 1.2 billion liters of toxic water was poured out into the Pomba and Paraíba do Sul rivers. In March 2006, a leaking let 400 million liters of muddy water escape making its way to Rio de Janeiro.