
Brazilian Bishop's Hunger Strike in Defense of River Moves World to Action

Contributed by Heredy Bono
Sunday, 02 December 2007

After two years of frustrated attempts to establish a dialogue between social movements and the Brazilian government to discuss the São Francisco river diversion project in Brazil's Northeast, Brazilian Catholic bishop Luiz Cappio has resumed on November 27 his hunger strike in defense of the river.

In an open letter to president Lula, the prelate declares his opposition to the mega-project and talks about his worries regarding the river's degradation.

And he vows to only stop his fasting if two conditions are met: the Brazilian army's withdrawal from the project's construction site (the army is in charge of the construction works for both sites at the north and east canal) and the final suspension of the São Francisco River diversion project.

President Lula and the Minister of National Integration responded grimly: the construction works would continue regardless of the bishop. All former protest activities of social movements (only this year two large protest camps took place) have always been ignored by the government.

Lula's Folly

The construction of one of the most controversial mega-projects of the Lula government is about to begin: the São Francisco River diversion project, known as the Transposição do rio São Francisco.

With this megalomaniac enterprise, which will predominantly benefit export-oriented agro-business, President Lula says he wants to make history in the poor semi-arid region of Northeast Brazil. But this controversial project reveals severe political, economic and regional conflicts of interests. And, it is criticized by experts as well as legal authorities.

However, since the beginning of the year the government is forcing the start-up of construction by all possible means, disregarding the project's ecological and social consequences. The euphoria about bio-fuels, especially sugarcane alcohol has brought additional pressure to irrigate land for sugar cane plantations.

The ambition to encourage export-orientated agro-business in the Northeast is used by the Lula government to justify the building the project by any means necessary.

Since the beginning of June, military battalions are in charge for the construction works for the canals. This government procedure, ignoring ongoing legal complaints brought by opponents of the project evokes memories of Brazil's military dictatorship. In many aspects the plan leads us to remember the megalomaniac projects of the 1970's, such as the infamous Trans-Amazon highway construction.

The Landless Workers' Movement (MST), Movement of Dam-Affected People (MAB), Movement of Small Farmers (MPA), the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), the Pastoral Fishers Commission (CPP) and many other social movements have formed a unique alliance with fishing communities and indigenous people to halt the beginning of construction through radical non-violent actions.

The Mega-Project

The São Francisco river diversion project includes the construction of two canals 400 km (249 miles) and 220 km long (137 miles), which are supposed to transport 26.3 m³/s (7,000 gallons) of water from the São Francisco River to other smaller rivers in the Northeast.

The considerable difference in altitude has to be overcome by pumping the water up 165 m (541 feet) for the northern canal and 364 m (1194 feet) for the eastern canal. In total the project includes nine pumping stations, 27 aqueducts, eight tunnels and 35 water reservoirs as well as two hydroelectric plants.

According to the current version of the project, 70% of the water will be destined for irrigation purposes, 26% for urban use (mainly by the city of Fortaleza) and the remaining 4% for the rural population.

The principal winners of the project will be the agro-industrial sector (e.g. fruit and sugarcane plantations and shrimp farms).

But the official propaganda cleverly utilizes the problems of rural water distribution and the resulting misery to make the billions of dollars in investment acceptable in the public's mind.

In fact, the poor riverine communities including artisanal fisherfolk, indigenous people and small farmers, whose livelihood entirely depends on the river will be the big losers. Instead of democratizing water resources, this mega-project will further concentrate control in the hands of the ruling elite.

Even international donors could not be convinced of the benefits of this plan. A World Bank study argues against granting a loan for the project, since the positive effects on poverty reduction could not be proven. The principal financing strategy will be the transferring of project costs to water users.

With the São Francisco River diversion, water costs are expected to rise five-fold. This means that once again Brazilian taxpayers are supposed to pay the costs of promoting the export of agricultural goods.

The São Francisco River diversion is an extremely costly enterprise with very doubtful social benefits. The project will consume half of all public investment in water infra-structure, as defined in the Program for Acceleration of Economic growth (PAC).

Over the next four years investments of 6.6 billion Brazilian reais (US\$ 3.4 billion) are earmarked for the project. Its yearly operational expenses are estimated into 93.8 million reais (US\$ 48.6 million).

There are much cheaper and more effective alternatives to the diversion project. A recent study carried out by the National Water Agency (ANA) shows that the water supply problem faced by populations of the northeast region can be solved through 530 decentralized projects in 1,112 municipalities, at half the cost of the diversion project.

Critics of the project point out that the problem of the semi-arid region is not the lack of availability of water but rather the unfair distribution of existing water resources, such as the 37 million m³ of water retained in the more than 70.000 small, medium and large reservoirs and dams in the region.

The drought problem in the Northeastern semi-arid region requires effective management of available water, and cannot be solved through one single Pharaonic project.

The Supreme Court is still analyzing the legality of the construction permits. Several legal aspects are questioned: the lack of authorization from the National Congress for use of water resources on indigenous lands; lack of a clear consideration of the impacts that the project may cause on the region's historical, archaeological, artistic, cultural and architectural heritage; and impacts on traditional populations in the São Francisco River watershed.

Furthermore, the destination of the transferred water for irrigation purposes disregards the decision made by the São Francisco River Basin Committee, which approved the use of this water only for human and animal consumption.

Many experts also point to the fact that this government project completely ignores climate change scenarios. According to independent studies, the impacts of global warming in Northeastern Brazil will mean a decrease in 20% in the flow of the São Francisco River.

One of the construction consortiums in the running to build one of the costliest section of the canals is involved in a huge corruption scandal, and is under investigation by the Federal Police. These scandals confirm the suspicion that the

diversion project is yet another mega-project conceived to divert public resources to the powerful building industry, to corrupt companies that provide illegal financing of election campaigns.

The Missing Dialogue

The most startling protest action against the São Francisco diversion project was the eleven-day hunger strike by Bishop Dom Luiz Cappio in October 2005, which drew worldwide attention to the issue. The condition for ending the hunger strike was a dialogue process between the government and civil society representatives. But the government's promise of a longer-term public debate with affected people was not kept.

The objections of people who live in the São Francisco River area and whose livelihoods depend on the river are not being heard. Indigenous people of the Truká, Tingui-Botó, Pankararu, Kiriri, Atikum and Tuxá peoples, quilombola communities (descendants of escaped African slaves who set up autonomous communities), fishermen and small farmers are systematically ignored in official project studies.

During this year, many protest actions were organized by the traditional riverine communities. The highlight was a one week protest camp in Brasília in March as well as the occupation of the construction site in end of June and beginning of July.

A diverse group of social movements, indigenous groups and environmental organizations gathered near the military bases in the middle of the semi-arid region in the region of Cabrobó, Pernambuco.

However, the Integration Ministry, responsible for the project, did not change its position in any way. The refusal to dialogue with the public is leading to the radicalization of the protest against the authoritarian top-down policy of the government.

After two years frustrated trials to establish a dialogue between social movements and the government to democratically discuss the polemic Sao Francisco River diversion project, Bishop Luiz Cappio resumed his hunger strike on November 2007, in a desperate attempt to draw public attention to this imminent disaster.

Letter Campaign

An email and letter campaign is being promoted to make the Brazilian government aware that the imposition of the São Francisco river diversion project casts a damning light on Brazilian democracy.

Below is the information being sent to the international community:

Please don't worry about returning mails due to full mail boxes.

It is important to send a blind copy (Bcc) to apoio.dom.cappio@gmail.com

In this mailbox we will store all the email copies sent to the authorities in Brasília, print them out and deliver them directly in Brasília.

Please forward this solidarity campaign to your contact lists.

Juazeiro (Bahia), 30th November 2007

Peoples' Coalition for the Restoration of the São Francisco River

Below the mailing list for the protest-letter:

PRESIDÊNCIA DA REPÚBLICA

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Protest Letter:

President of Federal Republic of Brazil - Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva

Minister for National Integration - Geddel Vieira Filho

Dear Sirs,

We follow with interest Brazilian Government plans for the São Francisco River regarding the diversion/inter-basin water transference (Transposição) and Revitalization (Revitalization) Projects.

Respectfully, your Excellencies, we wish to share our concerns regarding the possible social and environmental impacts resulting from the Transposição.

We understand the National Integration River's ("Rio da Integração Nacional") historic, cultural, social, economic and environmental importance. We are also aware of the problems of this river which include deforestation, silting, water pollution from sewage and agro-toxins, issues resulting from the construction and operation of dams, and the uncontrollable growth of agribusiness at the expense of local ecosystems (cerrado and caatinga). The current low water level at the Sobradinho dam, which now holds 14% of its volume capabilities, attests to the river's deterioration.

The current degradation of the São Francisco River makes troubling any proposed new use to the existing multiple ones, which are already conflicting in several dimensions.

Since November 27, 2007, Dom Luiz Cappio, Bishop from the diocese of Barra in Bahia State, resumed his fast and prayers in opposition to the authoritarian way by which the Federal Government imposed the São Francisco River's Transposição without a democratic debate over the real viability of this project.

In a letter sent to the Brazilian President, Dom Luiz reminds that Mr. Lula did not meet his side of the original accord sealed in October 2005. Then, Dom Luiz halted his eleven-days fast after the president's promise to stop the Transposição work and to start a broad dialogue about the project with society.

The Transposição works will not deliver water to 12 million northeasterners. Advertisement campaigns have shown the wrong message. Quite the other way around, the project will benefit the production of upscale fruits, ethanol, steel, and shrimp culture to supply mainly the international market, making richer a few large companies.

The semi-arid region has a diversity of possibilities and potential hydro resources fit to promote human consumption and sustainable development. Better and cheaper solutions exist to meet the needs of the semi-arid inhabitants.

Alternatives include the 530 projects suggested by National Water Agency - ANA (Agência Nacional de Águas) - which would supply 1,3 thousand municipalities of the region at a price of R\$ 3,6 billions (almost half of the R\$ 6,6 billions that will be used for the Transposição). Alternative ways to deal with the climate in rural zones are proposed by Articulação do Semi-Árido - ASA, a non- governmental organization.

Given this situation, the Transposição Project raises serious questions. Some have to do with several illegalities which have been legally challenged and still await a decision by the Brazilian Federal Supreme Court (Supremo Tribunal Federal - STF).

Therefore, people, entities, and organizations listed below demand the suspension of the Transposição work which has been started by the Brazilian army. We demand that the desperate voices of the people in the São Francisco River basin, represented by Dom Luiz Cappio's fasting, be finally heard.

Pastoral Land Commission (CPT) -Salvador, Bahia state, 27 November, 2007