



MAR Background Report: Indigenous Protest in Brazil

Hundreds of indigenous people demonstrated at the National Congress in Brasilia, capital of Brazil, following the announcement for the go-ahead on the Amazonian Belo Monte dam. Construction is due to begin soon on what will be the third largest dam in the world, set to be completed in 2015. The Brazilian energy minister contends all affected populations will be compensated and resettled. Environmentalists allege that, besides flooding 190 square miles and displacing 50,000 people, the dam will significantly harm the rainforest. Estimates of the impact in 2008 originally put displacement figures closer to 15,000. The initial project was abandoned in the 1990s in the midst of extensive protests in Brazil and around the world. On February 8, an indigenous leader delivered a petition opposing the project signed by over a half million people.

According to data from the Minorities at Risk Project, there are more than 200 indigenous groups in Brazil, most living in the Amazonian and central regions of the country, and speaking more than 100 native languages. More than 75% of indigenous peoples live in social groups of 1,000 people or less. Members of indigenous groups are among the poorest in Brazilian society and are targets of discrimination. In 1988, a new democratic constitution was formulated, recognizing the unique customs and organization of the indigenous peoples. The new constitution sparked indigenous mobilization, although organization on a national and transnational level is a much more recent phenomenon. In 2006, 800 representatives attended the first national conference on indigenous issues. The constitution also stipulates that any use of Indian land that harms the indigenous population is forbidden. However, these lands are not completely autonomous and remain under the ownership of the state.

In regards to construction along the Xingu, tribal leaders complained about lack of information, and one leader threatened war and “blood spilled” if his tribe was pushed from their land. There have been several protests in the past, one in 2008 which culminated with violence against a Brazilian engineer. According to MAR data, several violent incidents against landowners, miners and others have been observed in recent years, indicating an inclination of late among indigenous people to take a more active and violent role in promoting their causes.

The Xingu basin is considered a vital environmental resource, especially in terms of biodiversity. Socially, the area is diverse as well; 24 different indigenous groups live along the Xingu. With rights groups and environmental organizations alike focused on this heated issue, it is unlikely protests will soon end.



About the Minorities at Risk Project

The Minorities at Risk (MAR) Project, based at the University of Maryland, monitors and analyzes the status and conflicts of politically-active communal groups in countries with a current population of at least 500,000. The project is designed to provide information in a standardized format that aids comparative research and contributes to the understanding of conflicts involving relevant groups. Selected project materials on more than 283 groups (the MAR database and codebook as well as detailed historical chronologies) are available on the [project's website](#) for researchers, public officials, journalists, students, activists and others interested in the topic. The project also has collected data on 118 ethnopolitical organizations representing MAR groups in the Middle East and North Africa.



Minorities at Risk Project
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