
Brazil: Indigenous peoples restart their struggle against dams on the Xingu river

Since their arrival in the Amazon, "white men" have had an ever-increasing impact on that region. However, it was not until World War 2 that deforestation became a large-scale process. Today, some 80% of the Amazon forest is still standing, but estimations are that its destruction will be completed in the next decades if nothing is done to stop it. The hope that "something" could be done was closer than ever in 1989, when the first meeting of indigenous peoples was held in Altamira.

The image of an indigenous Kayapo woman threatening the president of Eletronorte with her knife travelled throughout the world. Indigenous leader Paulo Payakan went to the offices of the World Bank in Washington to speak against the financing of the hydroelectric dam of Kararao, because it would destroy nature and violate the rights of the native inhabitants of the region. The result was that Eletronorte had to put aside its dam building plans on the Xingu river. This victory was to a large extent possible through the broad support received by the indigenous peoples from politicians, scientists, artists, NGOs, and entrepreneurs from the so-called "green industries."

Thirteen years later, and taking advantage of an energy crisis, Eletronorte has returned with its plan of building a hydro-plant in Kararao. They now call it "Belo Monte", in an attempt to erase the history of struggles against it. Paulo Payakan, first condemned by the influential magazine "Veja", and only later -- in a controversial trial-- by the courts of justice, is now impeded to circulate outside the indigenous territories. Differently from what happened in 1989, the famous singer Sting was not present at the new Altamira meeting. The meeting was also ignored by the mainstream media, by the cosmetics multinationals, and by the NGOs that developed during the past years to a large extent as a result of their relationship with the indigenous peoples.

The struggle against the Xingu dams is not lost. Leaders of the movement have already been killed, the mass media has been corrupted, and hydro-plants have been privatized even before having been built. But if in 1989, the indigenous people who participated numbered 600, at this second meeting at Altamira there were over 5000 people --including indigenous representatives and rural workers. The movement will need to greatly increase in the coming months. Humanity, impacted with the image of the global warming of the planet, watching how a 50 billion tonne block of ice comes off the Antartica, may finally become aware of the impending disaster of the Amazon forest going up in flames. There is still hope that we will not become witnesses or accomplices of the death of Xingu river.

By: Rodolfo Salm.