
Bolivia: Brazilian dam project threatens the lives of Amazon communities

On 11 September 2006 the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA) (the Brazilian environmental authority) approved the Environmental Impact Assessment on the construction of two dams in Brazilian territory on the Madera River, the largest tributary to the Amazon River.

This issue had caused concern amongst Bolivian and Brazilian scientists because, according to the data from the study itself, the dams will slow down the speed of the river flow, causing changes in the river itself and deteriorating the water quality, in addition to the impacts on smaller rivers flowing into the Madera river, an aspect not considered in the Environmental Impact Assessment. The flood area will reach as far as Bolivia and with time, the river bed will rise, with further negative effects on the flood problem.

Additionally, the expected changes will affect the living conditions of the inhabitants of the Bolivian Amazon, who obtain most of their food and sustenance from the rivers and the forest. Representatives of organizations and institutions from the northern Amazon region have stated with alarm that “these changes are going to frighten off the fish and bring them disease and death and the same will happen with the birds and other river animals and forest animals. The gathering of Brazil nuts and timber-yielding species will be seriously affected.”

The tropical forest remaining in the hands of Bolivia is still in a good state of preservation. Apart from agriculture, hunting and fishing, the population basically subsists on extractive activities such as gathering Brazil nuts (*Bertholletia excelsa*), of which Bolivia is the greatest exporter in the world. Brazil nut economy requires unaltered forests. Unlike Bolivia, in the Brazilian zone of the Amazon the environment has been greatly destroyed with forests replaced by grazing lands for cattle and displacement, very often under duress, of communities further increasing the ranks of the shanty-towns in the Brazilian mega-cities. For them development has signified becoming city poor and in many cases for the indigenous peoples of the region, it has signified their physical extermination.

The inhabitants of the rural area of the Amazon region grow crops in the wetlands left by the rivers following the rainy season. The projected dams will flood these areas permanently, thus eliminating the agricultural base for many communities. Furthermore, this permanent flooding will contaminate their drinking water, bringing with it greater problems of malaria, dengue, leishmaniasis (an infectious parasitic skin disease), diarrhoea in children and possibly other diseases as was the case in Brazil with the construction of other dams.

The construction of hydroelectric plants is usually accompanied by the promise of cheap energy but, as in other cases, the astronomical cost of the dam and its installations may well convert the myth of cheap energy from the rivers into a sad reality of high costs and greater foreign indebtedness for the countries involved.

The two dams and their transmission line will in fact be part of a larger project including two other dams, one in waters shared between Brazil and Bolivia and the other in the latter country in addition

to a 4000 km long waterway that will oblige major changes to be made in the region's river system to convert them into canals.

Considering the serious threat facing the Amazon region, representatives of organizations and institutions from the northern Amazon region – municipal councillors, the university community, representatives of fisherfolk associations, indigenous peoples' associations, rural school teachers, CARITAS, IPHAE, Foro Regional Norte Amazónico, FOBOMADE, among others - gathered in the City of Riberalta, Bolivia, on 12 October 2006, resolved:

“To request the National Government to intervene immediately before the Government of Brazil and international organizations, such as the United Nations, in defence of our territory, our rivers, our flora and fauna, the environment and our way of life. We also request that our right to timely information on the formalities and results of these formalities be recognized and taken into account.

To warn the Brazilian government that we will defend our territory at all international proceedings and show the world how major works are planned, regardless of the populations inhabiting the Amazon and regardless of the environment.

To convene our Brazilian brothers and sisters who are concerned and likely to be affected by the works, to join us in a world protest together with all the peoples and nations of the world, in defence of our Amazon territory.”

Article based on information from: “Pronunciamiento de la región amazónica de Bolivia en torno a las represas proyectadas sobre el Río Madera”, 12 October 2006, sent by Foro Boliviano sobre Medio Ambiente y Desarrollo (FOBOMADE), e-mail: comunicación@fobomade.org.bo, <http://www.fobomade.org.bo>; “Destrucción de la Amazonía: Brasil aprueba EIA de represas que inundarán territorio boliviano”, Pablo Villegas, FOBOMADE, http://www.fobomade.org.bo/foro/doc/brasil_madera_bolivia.pdf