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## Brazil: Social and environmental disaster caused by paper mill

In Minas Gerais during the last week-end in March, more precisely during the night of Friday 28 a deposit for chemical products belonging to the paper mill "Industria Cataguazes" collapsed. The mill, close to the city of Cataguazes, is located on the Pomba river, where millions of litres of caustic soda, chlorine and other toxic products used in making paper leaked out.

The Pomba River flows into the main river of the State of Rio de Janeiro, the Paraiba do Sul, which was also affected by the contamination. A large patch covered the whole river at the height of the Municipality of Sao Joao da Barra, and moved towards the ocean, contaminating on its way the beaches of Atafona, Grussai and Iquipari. Pictures on television showed the rivers Pomba and Paraiba do Sul covered by a white foam, dead fish floating on the surface and long queues of people waiting for water which was taken to them by truck.

It is perhaps the greatest ecological disaster that has ever happened in the country and according to scientists, it will take the ecosystem some 15 years to recover. The spill, estimated at 1,200 million litres of toxic products, affected approximately one million people, and implied that over half a million residents in eight municipalities had no water supply for various days and that for 90 days fishing has been prohibited in the two contaminated rivers. To face the damage that this means to the local fisher-people, the minister of the Environment, Marina Silva, announced that they would receive a monetary compensation of one minimum wage per month during the period that this activity is suspended due to the contamination.

There is a second 700 million-litre tank of toxic material belonging to the company that is also a cause for concern as it is not considered to be safe and preventive measures are being taken.

Some environmental organisations have placed responsibility on the Government of the State of Minas Gerais, in addition to the company, for omissions in monitoring measures. The mill has been closed down and Federal Justice has decreed preventive imprisonment of the company's administrative Director, Felix Santana, and the partner manager, Joao Gregorio do Bem, who may have to face criminal charges. Furthermore, the government announced that it will fine the company for the amount of approximately 15 million dollars. However, it is hard to believe that any figure exists that can compensate for the serious damage, perhaps some of it irreversible, that has been caused to the ecosystem, the economy and the health of the region.

During the public audience of the Environmental Commission of the Chamber of Deputies, the Minister of the Environment, Marina Silva, spoke about the four goals the Ministry is working towards in the next few years: transversality, social monitoring, strengthening of the environmental sector and sustainable development. The Minister stated that a major effort has to be made to avoid environmental policy from being an isolated policy of the Ministry, and to make it into an integrated government action.

This is certainly a major challenge, as are all the issues that this disaster brings to the forefront, that are far from being solved and perhaps have not been sufficiently discussed: social and environmental

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costs, corporate responsibility, social monitoring, environmental policy, sustainability of production models, among others. What was made clear is the weakness of the argument of those who propose self-regulation by the companies in the framework of opening up markets and de-regulation.

It is not that the companies ignore environmental issues: most of them boast about their environmental concerns on their web pages. The "Industria Cataguazes de Papel" company itself declares that "environmental preservation through recycling of paper from the major urban centres such as Sao Paulo, Vitoria, Rio de Janeiro and Belo Horizonte is the Cataguazes' commitment towards society" and it even argues that "each ton of recycled paper avoids logging an average of 20 to 30 eucalyptus trees, or between 16 to 30 native trees." What will it say now about its "commitment to society"? Sorry? At all events, what is important is to ensure strict monitoring by the State and by society as a whole of company activities so that this type of situation is not repeated. The companies may have good intentions, but they are not charities. What interests them above all is their profitability.

Society must take up these issues with rigor and without being naive, because the companies adapt to the times and carry out all the necessary marketing to continue with their business. However, "accidents" continue to take place. There have been several samples, how many more are needed?

Article based on information from: "Fish, animals and people at risk after caustic soda leak", 04 Apr 2003, Hannah Hoag, Nature.com, [http://www.gristmagazine.com/forward.pl?forward\\_id=975](http://www.gristmagazine.com/forward.pl?forward_id=975) ; "Brazil fights spread of toxic spill from factory", Andrei Khalip, Boston Globe, Reuters, 03 Apr 2003, [http://www.gristmagazine.com/forward.pl?forward\\_id=976](http://www.gristmagazine.com/forward.pl?forward_id=976) ; "Decretada prisão dos donos da empresa acusada de vazamento de produtos tóxicos em MG", ambientebrasil.com.br, 03/04/2003, <http://www.ambientebrasil.com.br/noticias/index.php3?action=1> ; "Desastre ambiental no Brasil: poluição do Rio Pomba, EMS-SEMA, [http://www.ems-sema.org/portugues/act/03\\_04\\_rio.pomba.html](http://www.ems-sema.org/portugues/act/03_04_rio.pomba.html) ; Información de "Industria Cataguazes de Papel", <http://www.cataguazesdepapel.com.br>