



■ AQ Feature

Why Amazon Tribes Are Losing the Fight Against New Dams – Again

BY JULIANA BARBASSA

Another fight between developers and indigenous tribes is raging deep in the rain forest. The rules have changed since Belo Monte. Who will win this time?



A Mundurucu tribal leader. Photo: Maria Tama/Getty



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Battle for the Amazon: How Indians Are Fighting New Development



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This time, the government has vowed to take all necessary measures to prevent another debacle. It has said it will conduct an environmental impact report, consult the indigenous groups living in the area, and take into consideration the needs of traditional riverside communities.

However, the people of Sawré Muybu told a different story when *Americas Quarterly* visited earlier this year. And, unlike previous generations of indigenous peoples, they are using every legal, political and symbolic means available to fight back and preserve their way of life.

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“The report is on my desk, ready to be enacted,” Assirati told the Munduruku during a video-recorded meeting in Brasilia. But she couldn’t go ahead, she said, because “as you know, there is a proposal to build a hydropower plant, which will include a dam to generate energy. And that dam is very close to your land.”

Nine days after that startling admission, Assirati quit her job, alleging personal reasons. In her first interview after leaving, she said she was “tremendously unhappy” to work under an administration that had nearly paralyzed the work of FUNAI.

“We were told that no demarcation at any stage...would go forward without the evaluation of the Ministry of Justice and the chief of staff ,” she told Agência Pública.

Around this time, the Munduruku began resorting to more radical steps. When researchers working on an impact report entered their territory without their authorization, they seized three biologists. Last year, 90 of them invaded the regional offices of FUNAI to spur the agency into action.

The federal government reacted by sending in dozens of Federal Police troops equipped with high-powered weapons and helicopters to rescue the biologists, and using law enforcement to accompany surveyors.

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The tale of why these great dams are deemed necessary is rooted in a complex tangle of Brazil’s recent economic growth, policy mistakes and geography. Brazil’s massive river network, which spans an area as large as the continental U.S., already generates more than three-fourths of the nation’s electricity. With 60 percent of its potential still untapped, it is an obvious target for new development.

Hydroelectric power has become more controversial in recent years, mainly because of environmental concerns. Some dams have even been dismantled in the United States. Yet proponents of expansion, including President Rousseff, argue Brazil’s development needs are pressing.

“Brazil is blessed in that it can generate energy from the strength of its rivers,” Rousseff said last year during her weekly radio address, “Coffee with the President.”

“Our country is growing fast, and needs to grow more so that all Brazilians have access to the benefits of the modern world,” Rousseff continued. “We need to expand industry, generate many jobs. For that to happen, we need energy.”

On the heels of strong economic growth that pulled tens of millions out of poverty during the past 20 years, Rousseff’s government said Brazil needs to grow its generating capacity of 121,000 megawatts by nearly 6 percent every year through 2022.

However, government mismanagement compounded by drought has left the energy sector in turmoil. Due also to high taxes and delays in building new projects, Brazil’s energy is the most expensive on the planet by some measures.

“We’ve had a series of grave errors in the sector, with a corresponding loss of competitive advantage for Brazilian industry,” said [Claudio Sales](#), president of the think tank [Instituto Acende Brasil](#).

As a result, Brazilians will see their electricity bills go up by about 50 percent or more this year, [Sales](#) said. That backdrop, plus the fact that most of Brazil’s population lives far from the Amazon along the southeastern coast, may explain why battles against new dams don’t get much attention nationally. Recession and Rousseff’s political troubles tend to grab most of the headlines. The Mundurkú are, in a sense, on their own.

Environmental spin room

An hour’s boat ride from Sawré Muybu, Pimental is a fishing village of about 700 people with a mix of indigenous, European and Afro-descendant residents. Here too, the land would be flooded if the São Luiz do Tapajós dam goes forward. But the prospect of jobs and compensation payments is tempting some villagers anyway.

A government study predicted construction could bring 13,000 workers to the area. "Some people are hopeful. They think that with all this big money circulating, some of it will come their way," said João Pereira Matos, a local merchant.

Today, most Pimental residents survive from the forest and the river that surrounds it, from the muscular tucunarés fish they wrestle out of the river to the armadillos, wild pigs and tapirs they hunt. Along Pimental's beaten-earth streets, residents lead an austere, self-sufficient life in simple wooden or wattle-and-daub homes.

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This time around, the consortium hired a public relations firm to produce a series of full-color pamphlets with titles like "Questions and Answers About the Viability Studies for the São Luiz do Tapajós Dam." Seemingly every villager has a copy, often tucked away in little plastic bags to protect them from the dirt and humidity. Yet few profess to fully understand — or believe — what's inside.

No amount of PR can spin away the environmental concerns related to the project. Even by the Amazon's high standards of eco-diversity, the Tapajós Basin stands out, said Adrian Barnett, a British rain forest ecologist based at INPA, the National Institute of Amazonian Research, who has been working in the region since the 1980s. This river has been cutting its course for over 100 million years, and "has ecosystems that have been around longer than mammals, let alone mankind."

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In places like Itaituba, a town of 130,000, you can see the results of past trade-offs. Itaituba grew in bursts, fed by the region’s economic boom-and-bust cycles: rubber, gold, then megaprojects like the TransAmazon Highway, which bisected the town in the 1970s.

Like the TransAmazon, which decades later is little more than a rutted dirt track, Itaituba has an air of unfulfilled promise. Sewage runs in troughs through the town and into the Tapajós River, which is also the town's potable water source. Streets are unpaved, and on neglected corners, trash piles up. Yet people like Valmir de Aguiar, Itaituba's former mayor and the region's biggest businessman, have made a fortune from cattle, gold mining, real estate and construction.

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Tags: [Brazil](#), [Belo Monte](#), [infrastructure development](#), [Amazon](#)

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