Brazilian Indigenous protest construction of Belo Monte Dam on Xingu River in Brazilian Amazon, 2008-2011

2008
to: Fall
2011
Country: Brazil
Location City/State/Province: Xingu River, Amazon Rainforest, Para

Goals:
To ensure that the rights of Brazil’s Amazonian indigenous peoples are maintained through the protection of the Xingu River Basin by preventing the construction of the Belo Monte Dam due to predicted negative environmental impacts on the indigenous peoples’ ancestral land.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
- 019. Wearing of symbols
- 037. Singing
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 121. Refusal of public support

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 002. Letters of opposition or support
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
• 019. Wearing of symbols
• 037. Singing
• 038. Marches
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 121. Refusal of public support

Methods in 4th segment:

• 002. Letters of opposition or support
• 004. Signed public statements
• 006. Group or mass petitions
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 010. Newspapers and journals
• 011. Records, radio, and television
• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
• 019. Wearing of symbols
• 037. Singing
• 038. Marches
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 048. Protest meetings
• 121. Refusal of public support

Methods in 5th segment:

• 002. Letters of opposition or support
• 004. Signed public statements
• 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
• 006. Group or mass petitions
• 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
• 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 010. Newspapers and journals
• 011. Records, radio, and television
• 016. Picketing
• 018. Displays of flags and symbolic colors
• 019. Wearing of symbols
• 035. Humorous skits and pranks
• 037. Singing
• 038. Marches
• 047. Assemblies of protest or support
• 048. Protest meetings
• 097. Protest strike
• 107. Sympathy strike
• 121. Refusal of public support

Methods in 6th segment:

• 002. Letters of opposition or support
• 006. Group or mass petitions
038. Marches
047. Assemblies of protest or support
048. Protest meetings
162. Sit-in

Classifications

Classification:
Defense
Cluster:
Environment
Human Rights
National/Ethnic Identity

Group characterization:

- Arara
- Araweté
- Asurini
- Juruna
- Kayapó
- Parakanã
- Xikrin
- Brazilian Amazon’s Indigenous Tribes:
- Citizens of Altamira
- Environmentalists
- Social activists

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Kayapo Chief Raoni Metuktire

Kayapo Indians

Partners:
Xingu Para Sempre

Brazilian Federal Public Prosecutor

External allies:
Amazon Watch

Fundação Nacional do Índio

World Wildlife Fund

Inter American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR)

Interamerican Association of Environmental Defense (AIDA)
Involvement of social elites:
Brazilian federal judge Ronaldo Destêrro,

Celebrities: James Cameron, Bill Clinton, Sigourney Weaver, Arnold Schwarzenegger

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Environmentalists

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Citizens of Altamira
- I Encontro das Nações Indígenas do Xingu
- Kayapo Chief Raoni Metuktire
- Kayapo Indians
- Social Activists
- Sting
- Xingu Para Sempre

Groups in 3rd Segment:

- Arara
- Araweté
- Asurini
- Juruna
- Parakanã
- Xikrin
- Brazilian Amazon’s Indigenous Tribes:

Groups in 4th Segment:

- Amazon Watch
- Brazilian Federal Public Prosecutor’s Office
- World Wildlife Fund

Groups in 5th Segment:

- Arnold Schwarzenegger
- Bill Clinton
- Brazilian federal judge Ronaldo Destêrro
- Fundação Nacional do Índio
- James Cameron
- Sigourney Weaver

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: Approximately 6 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence
Opponents:
Brazil’s federal government, President Dilma Rousseff, Former President Lula da Silva, Consortium Norte Energia, Eletrobras, IBAMA (Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources), BNDES (Brazilian Development Bank), Maria do Carmo Cardoso

Nonviolent responses of opponent:
Not known

Campaigner violence:
None known

Repressive Violence:
None known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:
0 points out of 6 points

Survival:
1 point out of 1 points

Growth:
3 points out of 3 points

During the 1970s, when Brazil was ruled by a military dictatorship, the proposal of building several hydroelectric dams on the Xingu River was first presented. These dams were suggested as a way to increase energy supply to Brazil. The location of these proposed dams, along the Xingu River, was within the Brazilian Amazon in the region of Para, Brazil. The proposal was eventually put on hold, due to controversy regarding the dams’ potential location on indigenous land. The region, upon which the dams were suggested to be built, was made up of multiple indigenous tribes that occupied the land.

In 1989, another failed attempt was made to construct a six-dam setup on the Xingu River. In this instance, the local Kayapo Indians were concerned with the potential flooding of their land if the dams were to have been built on the Xingu River. Luckily, the Kayapo Indians were able to garner enough international support from the media, celebrities, and foreign governments to stop the construction of the six-dam complex. The Kayapo Indians bypassed their government and sought out international allies in order to provide foreign pressure on the potential construction of the Belo Monte Dam.

In the 1990s, the Brazilian government increased its focus on the future of Brazil’s energy consumption. The government proposed an “Accelerated Growth Programme” for the future of Brazil’s energy use. Similar to previous proposals, the program included the construction of dams, which would be built within the Brazilian Amazon. The Belo Monte Dam was proposed as means of providing public energy consumption, as well as providing power for the mining and mineral industries of Brazil. As the blueprint for the Belo Monte Dam began to take shape between the mid-1990s and the mid-2000s, the indigenous tribes of Brazil’s Amazon began to plot another plan of nonviolent resistance and action against the Belo Monte Dam Project.

As the years progressed, the indigenous peoples realized that the construction of the Belo Monte Dam would cause 20,000 of their tribe members to be displaced, as well as the destruction of natural wildlife, vegetation and their ancestral land through the flooding of their region.

Subsequently, in May 2008, the largest-ever-recorded meeting of indigenous peoples in the Brazilian Amazon took place. This meeting showed the Brazilian government that the indigenous tribes of the Brazilian Amazon took the Belo Monte Dam Project seriously and that the different native tribes were forming an alliance against the ‘Belo Monte Monster’.

Over the next few years, the indigenous peoples of the Brazilian Amazon and their allies protested the Belo Monte Dam Project
through multiple nonviolent actions. Major developments in the Belo Monte Case began to occur in early 2010, when Brazilian environmental agency IBAMA granted Norte Energia a provisional environmental license, which was the first of three licenses required for such development projects.

Shortly after, the Brazilian Federal Attorney General's Office suspended the project and effectively annulled the provisional license, citing unconstitutionality. The court made specific reference to Article 176 of their Constitution, which stated that federal law must determine the conditions of mineral and hydroelectric extraction when these activities take place in indigenous peoples' territories. Later that day, the appellate court for the region repealed the suspension and reinstated the project.

On August 12, 2010, the Brazilian indigenous peoples of the Amazon released an Indian Declaration against Belo Monte. Still, on August 26, 2010, President Lula signed the contract with Norte Energia despite outcries from the indigenous communities. With the second license still not granted, construction was only able to proceed once Norte Energia proved that it met all of its 40 socio-environmental conditions. Though 2010 saw many critical moments in the fight for the Xingu River, potentially most important of all of these was the release of the Independent Expert Panel Report on the Environmental Impact Analysis (EIA) in October. Besides discovering various omissions and methodological inconsistencies, they made note that the EIA, “does not address the drying of 100 kilometers of the Xingu River, an area called the ‘Big Bend’, which would suffer a nearly permanent drought because of the dam’s plan to divert about 80% of the river flow into manmade canals near the dam. The people who live in this ‘Big Bend’ area – indigenous communities, river dwellers, and small farmers... these communities’ livelihoods will be profoundly impacted.”

It would be fair to state that 2011 was the year throughout which the Belo Monte Case received the most international attention, and thus contained many crucial moments for fight of the Indigenous people of the Amazon. A partial installation license was granted by IBAMA on January 26, which authorized Norte Energia to begin limited construction work. On February 8, 2011, hundreds of citizens joined Brazilian indigenous people in marching upon the Presidential Palace to show their opposition to the partial installation license granted to Norte Energia. The peaceful protestors presented the President with a petition signed by 1 million people, and a letter from 87 civil society organizations, opposing the construction of the Belo Monte Dam.

Half a month later on February 25, 2011, the Federal Public Prosecutor filed its eleventh lawsuit against the Dam and suspended IBAMA’s partial installation license. On the same day, Brazilian federal judge Ronaldo Desterro formally blocked the project during Brazil’s biggest public hearing. A week later, on March 3, 2011, the President of a Federal Regional Court, Olindo Menezes, overturned the decision, arguing that there was no need for all conditions to be met in order for preliminary work to begin. Menezes’ ruling was in direct violation of the Brazilian Constitution.

On April 1, 2011, the Inter American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR) granted precautionary measures in defense of the indigenous communities. As the Interamerican Association of Environmental Defense (AIDA) states, “The Commission requested that the Brazilian government halt all construction and licensing for the Belo Monte Dam and that it protect the rights and health of indigenous communities.” Ignoring any and all appeals from civil society groups, transnational groups such as Amazon Watch, AIDA, and the IACHR, IBAMA granted the full installation license on June 1, 2011. Between the months of September and November, three federal court judges ruled on the case; two voted in favour of the project, and one against.

In the Fall of 2011, after thousands of people protested against Belo Monte in over 17 countries, Chief Raoni visited the United Nations in Geneva to inform representatives of the risks associated with building the Belo Monte Dam on the land of his people. Due to social media and websites such as Facebook and Twitter, nonviolent actions against Belo Monte and support for the Brazilian Indigenous grew tremendously. Other nonviolent actions have included sit-ins on the proposed site of the Belo Monte Dam, letters to the United Nations from the Indians and supportive NGOs, public letters to the President from Indigenous leaders, and international support from high-profile politicians and celebrities (e.g. Bill Clinton, Sigourney Weaver, James Cameron and Colin Firth).

The Brazilian government failed to provide a broad array of protections for their indigenous peoples, including the prohibition of removal of indigenous peoples from their lands, freedom from outside exploitation of their lands, and preservation of the
environmental resources necessary for their well-being and cultural survival. The Brazilian government did not recognize the right of indigenous peoples to benefit from natural resource activities on their lands while also protecting those lands from alienation. Furthermore, the government failed to allow indigenous people to develop their land according to their own usages, customs, and beliefs.

Regardless of the Brazilian government’s approval of the Belo Monte Dam project, the indigenous peoples have maintained their stance against the construction and continue to state their opposition of Belo Monte with the help of allies from around the world.

Research Notes

Sources:


Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
Chelsea Caldwell, 23/04/2012

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