

LATIN AMERICA

The World This Week



BRAZIL'S FIGHT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

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A YEAR AFTER THE DISASTER OF THE BRUMADINHO DAM

On January 25, 2019, a Brazilian dam located in the state of Minas Gerais burst, leaving most of the town of Brumadinho buried in mud and killing 270 people. So far, only 259 bodies have been identified. The dam, operated by global mining company, Vale, is not the first of its kind to fail. In 2015, the Mariana dam - also located in Minas Gerais - failed, killing 19. Vale is being held responsible for the disaster, paying out families and residents, as well as cleaning up the sludge and waste to reduce further pollution.

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Fabio Schvartsman, the company's CEO at the time, has been charged with 270 counts of homicide this week, while the company and a contractor have been accused of environmental crimes. State prosecutors allege that the company and its executives knew about the risks but falsified safety information to protect the company. At least nine other dams operated by the company are in danger of collapsing, forcing more relocations and raising more fear in high-risk regions.

Disasters still continue in the state of Minas Gerais. On the first anniversary of the Brumadinho dam disaster, at least 30 people have died due to landslides and flooding from severe storms. Weather agencies reported 17cm of rain in just 24 hours in the capital, Belo Horizonte - the heaviest rainfalls recorded in history.

Due to these disasters, people in other parts of Brazil are stepping up to fight against environmental injustices. On the other side of the country, in Autazes, Amazonas, the Mura indigenous group is fighting against Potássio do Brasil, another mining giant. Potássio do Brasil, a subsidiary of Forbes & Manhattan, a Canadian conglomerate, discovered large potash reserves in 2010 and received permission from the Brazilian mining agency to drill exploratory wells in 2013. While potash is useful to agribusiness, mining it can be harmful to the environment. One of the by-products of potash excavation is large amounts of salt. While the company promises to prevent the salt from reaching water sources, the Mura are deeply concerned due to heavy rainfall and extreme heat in the region.

In 2017, the Mura, backed by Brazil's public prosecutor's office, reached a court-approved deal with Potássio do Brasil. This deal states that the project must be halted until a "free, prior and informed consultation" has been carried out. This is the first time that an indigenous community in Brazil has ever won the right to carry out such a consultation.

Still, many remain doubtful of the consultation. Some speculate that the Brazilian government may ignore the result of the consultation. Others fear that Potássio do Brasil will move forward with its project because the area is not technically demarcated as indigenous land, even though the Mura claim it. Some speculate that this will be a continuous fight, highlighting that President Jair Bolsonaro is preparing legislation that seeks to authorise mining in indigenous reserves.

"I won't be told by Potássio, that comes from outside, that this land isn't ours. It is our land and they are the invaders."

-Aldinéson Pavão, leader of the village of Urucurituba