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A GDF Suez project is jeopardising the last uncontacted Amazonian tribes

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In 2008, the GDF Suez group set about constructing one of the largest dams in Brazil. With a 3300 MW capacity, the Jirau dam, which should be operational within two years, is part of a controversial programme which anticipates the construction of four hydroelectric power stations in the basin of the Madeira river, a tributary of the Amazon. This project, currently the largest in Latin America, is part of the 'Accelerated Growth Programme' launched in 2007 by President Lula. It represents several hundred square kilometres of stored water, including 258km² for the Jirau dam alone; it threatens not only the biological and sociocultural diversity of the region, the integrity of the territories occupied by indigenous peoples, riverside communities and other local populations living in the Madeira basin region, but also the very survival of some of the last uncontacted tribes left in the world.

The main tributary of the Amazon River, the Madeira is situated in Rondônia State, in north-west Brazil. In the 1980s, Rondônia was devastated by the huge Polonoroeste colonisation project, which outraged worldwide public opinion. Considered one of the worst ecological disasters that the World Bank has ever financed, the programme resulted in the disappearance of several indigenous groups and the destruction of more than 25% of the state's forests in the space of a decade.

Formed by the convergence of three rivers descending from the Andes, the Madeira extends over 1700 kilometres and its basin, shared by Brazil, Peru and Bolivia, covers nearly one quarter of the Amazon region. A region of exceptional biodiversity, the Madeira basin, whose nutritional contribution is essential for the maintenance of the biological harmony of the floodplains situated along its course and that of the Amazon, provides a habitat for several hundred species of fish and birds, as well as numerous species of endangered mammals.

The Madeira hydroelectric complex does not have unanimous support. Survival International and numerous Brazilian civil society and international organisations as well as indigenous communities and riverside populations are fiercely opposed to what they call a 'human and ecological disaster'.

Currently under construction, the Jirau dam would displace thousands of riverside communities and directly affect the Indian tribes that live in the Madeira basin, including several groups of uncontacted Indians who live near the construction site.

Domingo Parintintin, of the Parintintin tribe, which will be directly affected by the dam, bemoans, 'Our land is still unspoilt. We hope that the project will be stopped, because it is

our children who will suffer the consequences. They will no longer have enough fish or enough game to feed themselves’.

‘GDF Suez is disregarding our communities in the same way it does not respect the river’, declared Océlio Munoz, a local leader of the Movement of People affected by Dams (MAB). ‘Our lives are destroyed by a development model which treats the river and the land like commodities’.

Aside from its destructive impact on biodiversity and Indian and riverside communities, this project will have catastrophic consequences for the uncontacted Indians in the region. The opening up of routes for local transport services will enable the colonists to enter deeper into the region, and the colonists and the dam workers will use resources from the areas where the Indians fish and hunt, necessary for the Indians’ survival. The outsiders could also infect the Indians with illnesses against which they have little or no immunity. It is common for half of an uncontacted group to be seriously affected by relatively mild illnesses like ‘flu or measles during the year following first contact with the outside world.

FUNAI, the Brazilian government’s department for Indian affairs, has recently reported that the uncontacted Indians, who live 10 to 30 kilometres from the dam construction site, are running away, frightened by the noise of the machinery, towards a region exploited by gold miners. Contact with the miners could result in violent conflict.

Ignoring certain recent discoveries¹ which show that the impact of dams on global warming could often be greater than that of fossil fuel power stations with comparable capacity, the supporters of the Jirau hydroelectric dam promote its ‘positive ecological’ nature, and maintain that it will satisfy Brazil’s growing electricity needs, thereby assuring energetic independence without simultaneously increasing greenhouse gas emissions. It would not be possible ‘to wrong’ 190 million Brazilians for the sake of a few thousand Indians, or to prioritise the survival of a few hundred uncontacted Indians – without even taking into account the preservation of a unique biodiversity!

GDF Suez is, in its own words, a ‘responsible actor in Brazil’, which is ‘involved in numerous projects for the support of local populations and the preservation of biodiversity’ and ‘shows its distinctiveness by actively engaging with the communities impacted by its infrastructure projects by bringing genuine material and humane support to the peoples with which it interacts’, meaning that the Brazilian environmental authority, IBAMA, has, since 2006, approved the dam’s environmental impact assessment.

However, the environmental impact assessment was incomplete. It was restricted to the local impact of the project without taking into account the consequences for neighbouring countries Bolivia (which has officially protested against the dam) and Peru, which share the Madeira basin. It did not ask for the free, prior and informed consent of the indigenous peoples, as is required by international law and national legislation of the countries concerned. It did not take into account the irrefutable proof of the presence of groups of uncontacted Indians who are extremely vulnerable to contact with the outside world. Following previous disastrous experiences, FUNAI’s policy is now not to make contact with the uncontacted Indians but to allocate them a territory of their own, their only chance of survival.

¹ See ‘Methane Quashes Green Credentials of Hydropower’ by Jim Giles, in *Nature* n° 444, 30 Nov. 2006

The study, in order to have been complete, would have had to take into account the risks associated with the loss of access to natural resources, including common lands and resources open to public access (fisheries, agriculture on the alluvial plains, forestry products), as well as the interruption to river transportation and the inevitable involuntary or forced relocations. The compensation intended for the families directly affected by the creation of the dam's reservoir, has been completely insufficient and reflects the incomplete and biased impact studies carried out on the riverside populations.

GDF Suez is responsible for a series of violations of Brazilian and international law, of guidelines established by the International Hydropower Association and even its own corporate responsibility standards. It is equally accountable for illegal deforestation (for which it was sanctioned by the Federal Agency for the Environment) and inhumane working conditions imposed upon the workers in the construction sites.

Transformed well beyond the 'few arpents of snow' that God – according to Voltaire's expression evoking the unproductive lands of Canada– would have one day given over to Cain, the Amazon, which has become one of the most coveted after places in the world, is subjected today to the most destructive exploitation in its history. And as taxpayers we are very much part of the situation. Since the French government is the shareholder of 36% of GDF Suez, we are all giving our support for not only the destruction of a region of exceptional biodiversity, but above all for the more than likely disappearance of some of the last societies which form an essential part of human diversity. The civil society organisations which held the counter-summit to Davos last January were right to crown GDF Suez with the Public Eye Award, an 'award of shame' aimed at denouncing the irresponsible attitude of multinational companies towards both human beings and the environment. The eye was in the tomb and stared at Cain.