

Brazil: São Paulo drought poses public health and economic catastrophe

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São Paulo, the most populated city in the Americas, and the surrounding state of São Paulo are undergoing their worst drought in 80 years. Rainfall totals for the year are 300 to 400 millimeters (12 to 16 inches), 40 percent below normal. The reservoirs that the region depends upon have dwindled to 3 to 5 percent of storage capacity.

Greater São Paulo has a population of 20 million people, one tenth of the population of Brazil. The state of São Paulo has 44 million people. While the crisis is most severe in São Paulo proper, it is affecting some 70 cities in the region. Across the state, some 15 million people face a severe water emergency.

The city itself largely depends on the Cantateira system of five reservoirs (now at 3 percent capacity and threatened with drying up completely by the end of this year).

While the drought is a natural climate phenomenon, the necessary investment in water infrastructure has been delayed time and again (Cantateira was built in the 1970s) and has fallen far behind the population growth of the region. Since the late 1980s, the city and its surrounding suburbs have grown by more than 2.5 million people, primarily in the poor working-class shantytowns known as *favelas*. For the most part, the favelas lack adequate water and sewage systems, as well as electricity. In the São Paulo urban core, the repeated subdivision of older homes into one-room tenements, known as *cortiços*, also puts pressure on municipal services. Favelas and *cortiços* together now account for one-third of the inhabitants of Greater São Paulo.

In May of this year, with the approach of the World Cup soccer tournament, the city extended pipes into the “dead volume,” a few pools of stagnant water that had been beyond the reach of municipal pumps; these sources artificially boosted capacity and were quickly depleted. Water authorities were gambling that seasonal rains would boost the reserves in September. However, those

rains have failed to appear.

There has yet to be an official imposition of water rationing in the city itself; however, a recent survey of São Paulo indicates that 60 percent of its citizens experienced water shutoffs in September, up from 46 percent in August and 25 percent in July. Worst affected (65 per cent) are those households earning less than five minimum wages (US\$1,600). Less impacted are households earning more than ten minimum wages (32 per cent of the population).

Outside of the city, however, rationing has been imposed and is creating a public health crisis, particularly among favela dwellers, some of whom have been left entirely without potable water.

Al Jazeera reporter Gabriel Elizondo visited the town of Itu, where residents spoke of having to reuse sewage water to flush their toilets. “On Friday [October 17] dozens of people appeared at a local ravine overgrown with shrubs, all desperate to get any water they could from an obscure water pipe, the only source in their neighborhood,” wrote Elizondo. “This is where Rosa da Silva waited to get water, now a precious commodity in many neighborhoods in this working class town of 154,000 people outside Sao Paulo.

“Da Silva, who lives with her three children and two adult relatives, has been without water in her home for 12 days... Another Itu resident, 84-year old Antonio Barbosa, shuffled up to the line holding a plastic bottle.” Barbosa has been without water for ten days.

Nobody was able to tell Elizondo where the water in the pipe came from. Some said that they had gotten ill from drinking it. As in Itu, across the state there are reports of people lining up to collect water from drying streams and leaking pipes. The whole state is on the verge of a public health catastrophe.

Compounding this crisis has been unusually high heat for this Southern Hemisphere city (now in spring).

The drought and water restrictions are having an extreme effect on people, agriculture and industry. Important crops (coffee, sugar) are threatened with collapse.

Water-dependent industries (pulp and textile mills, chemical plants) are being forced to shut down, exacerbating Brazil's economic recession and increasing unemployment.

“The climate of the region is seasonal, with a rainy summer and a dry winter, and the drought has extended through the current dry season and the past rainy season,” noted Marcos Heil Costa, climate scientist at the Universidade Federal de Viçosa. “To make things worse, the onset of the rainy season—which usually happens in late September or early October—has not happened yet.”

As far back as 2007, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change had begun making predictions and issuing warnings of decreasing rain, for Brazil and other countries, as temperatures rose.

The water crisis is impacting tomorrow's presidential election runoff between incumbent Dilma Rousseff (Workers Party, PT) and Aécio Neves (Party of Social Democracy of Brazil, PSDB). The PSDB has ruled São Paulo for 20 years. In accordance with his free-market program, Neves had attacked Rousseff for policies that discouraged private investment in Brazil's decaying infrastructure.

During the final stage of the campaign, Rousseff began attacking Neves for his party's lack of foresight, planning and investment in the water infrastructure to adapt the region to less water.

The record of Rousseff and the PT has been as dismal on infrastructure and social investment as that of the PSDB administration in São Paulo. It was the failure of both major parties of the Brazilian bourgeoisie to provide essential public services that gave rise to the mass protests that brought millions into the streets of Brazil in June of last year.



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