

Hundreds missing, 58 dead in Brazil mine disaster

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Over 300 people are missing and 58 confirmed dead after a dam belonging to the Brazilian-based mining multinational Vale in the town of Brumadinho, in the southeastern Brazilian state of Minas Gerais, burst on Friday, January 25, releasing 13 million cubic meters of iron ore tailings on farms, villages and the local environment.

A sea of mud destroyed houses, dragged away cars and reached the Paraopeba River, responsible for one third of the water supply to the metropolitan region of Belo Horizonte, with some 5 million people, and about 50 other cities. There is the possibility that the mud in the Paraopeba River will reach the São Francisco River, the longest and one of the most important in Brazil, polluting 300 km of it that passes through four Brazilian states until it reaches the sea. The environmental impact of the disaster is incalculable.

Thousands of people in the region have had to flee their homes because of the advancing sea of mud. The death toll could have been greater if the mud had reached the center of Brumadinho, but it did erase small villages in the rural area of the town. Most of the dead and missing are Vale employees and their families.

Residents report that the mine's warning sirens, which could have mitigated the disaster, did not work at the time of the accident. According to a resident who spoke to the daily *O Estado de S. Paulo*, "a few months ago, [Vale's] technicians were here in the town to give instructions on the siren. They said that in case of emergency, it would ring. But it was not like that."

On Sunday morning, 350 people were evacuated from their homes by firefighters because of the risk of another dam burst at Vale's mine in Brumadinho. By the afternoon, the risk of collapse of this dam had been dismissed by the civil defense.

The causes of the tragedy are still unknown, and Vale said it had not detected any signs that the dam could burst. However, Minas Gerais prosecutor Guilherme de Sá Meneghin told *O Estado de S. Paulo*, "This new burst is far from a surprise, and one can not speak of an accident: this model is subject to disaster."

Built in 1976, the dam that burst is an upstream tailings dam, but, according to the prosecutor, there are today more modern technologies for treatment of tailings. "Brazilian mining companies prefer to use the cheapest, most profitable, the most risky methods," he said.

Until Sunday afternoon, two days after the dam burst, a Minas Gerais court had frozen 11 billion reais (US\$ 2.9 billion) in Vale's accounts for emergency measures and repair of environmental damage. In addition, Brazil's environmental agency, Ibama, fined Vale 250 million reais (US\$ 66 million). However, these figures are a fraction of the profits of one of the largest mining companies in the world—and the largest for iron ore—which in 2017 reached 22 billion reais (US\$ 5.8 billion dollars).

The population of Brumadinho and all of Brazil reacted to the tragedy with anger and revulsion. "You [Vale] are killing Minas Gerais. WE HAVE NOT FORGOTTEN MARIANA. MINAS REMEMBERS IT," a local resident wrote on social media.

"Irresponsible, criminal company, how much more blood will you spill?" another resident wrote. "What happened in Brumadinho today was not an environmental accident, it was a crime. Environmental disaster is an earthquake, a tsunami ... Irresponsibility of Vale and of the justice system that did nothing in 2015," another wrote on social media.

The tragedy in Brumadinho comes three years after Brazil's previous greatest environmental disaster. In November 2015, a Samarco dam, a joint venture between Vale and the Anglo-Australian BHP Billiton, burst and released more than 39 million cubic meters of iron ore tailings on the Bento Rodrigues district, in the city of Mariana, also in Minas Gerais. Eighty percent of the district of 600 inhabitants was buried by the mud, leading to the deaths of 19 people.

In Bento Rodrigues, there was no type of warning system for residents, and Samarco did not give any guidance to the residents in case of an accident, according to the daily *O Globo*.

The mud released by the dam burst in Mariana reached the

Doce River, killing 11 million tons of fish and affecting the water supply of 39 cities in the states of Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo, with a combined population of at least 500,000 people. It is expected that the recovery of the river will take dozens of years, if it is really able to recover at all. Eighteen days after the dam burst, the mud in the Doce River reached the sea on the coast of Espírito Santo, 650 km away from the accident, advancing along many kilometers of the coastline, affecting the marine life, fishing and local tourism.

To this day, no one has been held responsible or convicted of any crime for this human and environmental tragedy in Mariana. Ibama also fined Samarco 250 million reais (US\$ 66 million) and the joint venture has paid 1.3 billion reais in compensation to the local residents, but the construction of a new district has been delayed and is expected to be ready only next year. In addition to Samarco being charged with nine environmental crimes, 21 of its employees were charged with murder. After assuming the presidency of Vale in 2017 with the slogan “Mariana never again”, Fábio Schvartsman “apologized” for the tragedy.

After the tragedy in Mariana, there was an attempt to pass a bill in the the state Legislative Assembly of Minas Gerais on dam security that would have toughened inspections and levied harsher punishments on the mining companies. State deputy Rogerio Corrêa (PT), told *Folha*, “there was pressure from the [mining] companies,” so that the law was not approved.

Last December, Vale had obtained a license from the Minas Gerais government to increase by 88 percent the productive capacity of the Córrego do Feijão Mine, where the dam burst. According to *O Globo*, “the expansion project had its analysis procedures shortened, with the previous licenses, installation and operation evaluated at the same time. Normally, these licenses are approved individually.” After the disaster, the Minas Gerais government suspended Vale’s activities at the mine.

In Minas Gerais alone, the Brazilian state with the largest iron ore production, there are at least 400 tailings dams, 37 of them without guaranteed structural stability, according to the Association of Environmental Observers of Minas Gerais. In Brazil as a whole, there are 24,902 dams, 42 percent of which operate without any authorization or license, and only 3 percent of which were inspected in 2017. Of the 790 mining tailings dams, in 2017, only 263 were inspected, and 45 were found to be in precarious conditions. The Brumadinho dam which burst did not appear on this list.

Despite such a lack of dam inspection in Brazil, the Brazilian Congress has been moving toward even greater deregulation. Since the disaster in Mariana, six bills that would make environmental licensing more flexible have

been discussed. One of these bills, dubbed “Samarco’s Bill,” proposed that “the submission of an environmental impact study would already be sufficient for the execution of the construction—regardless of the results of the study,” *Folha* reported.

Of these bills, the most advanced in the Congress is a new environmental licensing law that relaxes and accelerates the environmental process and is supported by the rural caucus and the mining companies. In addition, the bill exempts new livestock and agricultural enterprises from the need for licensing. Bolsonaro’s agriculture minister, Tereza Cristina, herself a member of the rural caucus, said that the approval of the bill “would be a very good thing for agriculture and livestock.”

With the coming to office of the Bolsonaro government, these bills diminishing environmental regulation are moving forward. Last December, Bolsonaro criticized what he called the “environmental fine industry,” adding that they are “extortionate” and that they “hinder the execution of infrastructure construction.”

Bolsonaro has also criticized the Paris Agreement, and, before taking office, called for the cancellation of the UN Climate Conference in Brazil, preventing it from being held this year in the country. His foreign minister, Ernesto Araújo, has also criticized the “scientific dogma” of climate change, which, like Trump, he claims is the result of “globalism” designed to “favor China’s growth.”

As for Bolsonaro’s environment minister, Ricardo Salles, in his inaugural speech, he declared: “We need speed, agility, stability and legal certainty [for environmental licensing].”

Salles, who ran in Brazil’s October 2018 elections as a candidate for federal deputy for Sao Paulo with the slogan “zero tolerance against the left and the MST [Landless Rural Workers Movement],” but was not elected, is one of the nine ministers of Bolsonaro government being criminally investigated or charged in court. At the end of December, he was convicted of administrative improbity when he was environmental secretary of São Paulo for altering the protection map of the Tietê River, the most important of the state, to benefit a mining company. On Saturday, January 26, the São Paulo prosecutor’s office asked a Brazilian court to order Salles to leave the environmental ministry because of his conviction.



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