

CONFLICTING USE OF NATURAL RESOURCES IN ALCÂNTARA - BRAZIL

In the mid-1960s, Brazilian military authorities built the Barreira do Inferno Rocket and Satellite Launch Center in Parnamirim, a district next to Natal, capital of the State of Rio Grande do Norte, in Northeast Brazil.

Soon, as the district of Parnamirim became a touristic destination, plans for expanding the Barreira do Inferno Launch Center resulted not being feasible, and Brazilian military authorities decided, in the early 1980s, to build a new and bigger launch center in Alcântara, in the state of Maranhão, on a site they considered a complete demographic void.

Despite the fact that there had been unanimity regarding the advantages offered by the chosen area to implement the Centro de Lançamento de Foguetes de Alcântara [Alcântara Rocket Launch Center] - lying close to the Equator and having stable weather conditions – the Center location soon became controversial. This happened mainly because, in order to make way for it, 23 rural communities from Alcântara were forced to resettle, for the chosen area for the Alcântara Rocket Launch Center definitely was not a demographic void.

These communities had been in that area for a long time in small rural agglomerations, joining together families that held property titles of small tracts of land with other families in the household, who lived there with the owner's permission, and most of the time exploiting conjunctly the resources found in the surroundings.

The preparation to remove the population from the expropriated area was characterized by strong opposition from the community members, owners or not, who refused to leave.

After resisting for approximately two years, the expropriated families and the remaining community members reached an agreement with both the military administrating the Launch Center and the municipality of Alcântara. 132 families were eventually resettled in seven agrovilas located in the interior of the municipality.

Inequality between the parties that concluded the agreement made it, for that matter, a capitulation of the community members before the military in charge of setting up the Launch Center, since the agrovilas to which they had been transferred to did not

coadunate their way of life. The place was far from the coast, hence fishing for domestic consumption became extremely difficult, and production of some fish surplus, impracticable; collecting babassu coconut and producing its oil was made difficult, at first and for a while, because other babassu palm trees available to exploit had to be gradually found near the agrovilas.

Each family eventually received 15 hectares of gardens to be cultivated in an isolated fashion throughout the year. This was quite different from the gardens that were cultivated collectively on the area they lived before.

The entire resettlement process took place until 1987, leaving behind a trail of dissatisfaction and resentment among the community members who had been submitted to an agreement that was largely unsatisfactory for them.

As for the non-resettled, that is, the members of other rural communities of the municipality who were not established where the Launch Center was implemented, they feared that, with the eventual growth of the area occupied by the Center, they would have the same fate as the ones resettled on the agrovilas.

Abandonment and disregard, together with a long period of frustrations, resentments and fears the community members had been experiencing, were soon translated into the distrustful attitude they fostered towards everything extrinsic to them. Not only in regards with the Center, but also towards public authorities, politicians, and even social movements such as the Union of Rural Workers of Alcântara (STTR).

As for the Center, this established mistrust grew larger in the first implementation bids of the project from Alcântara Cyclone Space, the Cyclone 4 Terrestrial Complex.

Alcântara Cyclone Space was, then, a binational company formed by Brazil and Ukraine, especially established through a 2002 agreement between these two countries to implement and operate the Cyclone 4 Complex. The intended purpose of the company was to explore commercially the Complex, placing satellites in Earth's orbit for various purposes. It intended to make launches not only along the Equator, but also polar ones, that is, directed to the north.

The community mistrust was due, first and foremost, to the plan to place the Complex premises on the land occupied by three communities living in the surroundings of the Center – Mamuna, Baracatatiua and Brito. This fact implied a resettlement of the residents, making more present the fears that had been haunting them since the implementation of the Center and the events that followed it.

The environmental licensing procedures, that is, the environmental impact study of the new venture, were initiated, among other measures, by registering the community and drawing the socioeconomic profile of the communities involved, without further explanation, nor any dialogue with the community members, who were increasingly alarmed about these events.

Then, between November 2007 and April 2008, due to the execution of works in places near the communities of Mamuna and Baracatatiua, the company began, in order to make feasible the future installation of the Complex, to open roads in their land, causing deforestation and destruction of some garden areas. There was also the destruction of some trees considered traditional boundaries of delimitation between the communities of Mamuna and Baracatatiua.

In response to that, the residents of Mamuna blocked the access road to the community in order to prevent the continuation of the work in the area, establishing a conflict that was only appeased, at first, by the intervention of the Judiciary. The communities of Mamuna, Baracatatiua and Brito were then declared remnants of former communities of slaves who had been become free mainly by escaping or being abandoned by their masters. These are the *quilombos*, which according to a Brazilian legislation of 1988, are the legal owners of the land they occupy.

The environmental licensing and the environmental impact study of the Cyclone 4 Complex were then resumed in 2009, with basis on this new reality, that is, the establishment of the community of Mamuna, Baracatatiua and Brito as legal owners of the land from where once there was an intention of dislodging them.

Under these new circumstances, however, the Brazilian environmental authorities demanded changes in the study as a result of the negative experiences that environmental licensing and the preparation of the environmental impact study of the enterprise had already accumulated before the communities were recognized as owners of the land they lived on. It should now include a detailed ethnographic study of the communities of Mamuna, Baracatatiua and Brito, as well as the fact that community members should now be informed, in plain and direct language during public hearings, about the steps to be taken for the installation and operation of the Complex and the consequences these had on them.

It would then have to be disclosed to the community members that the equatorial launches intended to be made from the Complex, once it became operational, would lead to a periodic ban on fishing areas they used, because after the launches began, rockets would cross the ocean over those areas.

As for the polar launches, they would only be possible with a community resettlement, albeit now with an indemnity, because the north trajectory of the rockets would not only cross the space above the ocean, but also a long stretch of land where the communities of Mamuna, Baracatatiua and Brito were settled, creating life risks for the community which were unacceptable for all parts involved.

This would inevitably lead back to the question of removing the communities of Mamuna, Baracatatiua and Brito as well as to the conflict the members believed had been solved by their recognition as legal owners of the land they inhabited.

Thus, even before the public hearings took place, Alcântara Cyclone Space gave up, at least temporarily, the polar launches, focusing on, during the hearings, the discussion of the periodic interdictions of the fishing areas of the community members of Mamuna, Baracatatiua and Brito, motivated by the equatorial launches, and the resulting indemnities to which they would be entitled.

The project was then approved without the polar launches being discussed. This discontinuation we won't ever know if it was definitive or temporary once the Complex was never implemented mainly due to divergences between the Brazilian and Ukrainian partners, fact that recently resulted in the liquidation of Alcântara Cyclone Space.