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## Brazilian Plan for Water Diversion Is Greeted by Skepticism

By LARRY ROHTER

**J**UÁZEIRO-PETROLINA, Brazil, March 26 - For well over a century, the millions of people who live in the parched backlands of northeastern Brazil have looked at the São Francisco River with thirst and longing. Nearly 2,000 miles long, it has been seen as the one hope for ending the cycle of drought and exodus that has made this region the poorest and most backward in the country.

But now the government is poised to carry out a bold plan that it says will accomplish those goals. President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has authorized \$1.7 billion to build a pair of canals hundreds of miles long to divert water from this river basin, the country's second largest, to the most arid parts of the interior. This would be the first phase of a much larger project that envisions eventually redirecting water from the Amazon watershed to this area.

Ciro Gomes, Brazil's minister of national integration, likens the sweep and impact of the plan to the creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority in the United States about 70 years ago. "Roosevelt is a reference point to me," Mr. Gomes said in a telephone interview from Brasília, the capital. "You have to think of what that region was before and what it became later because of his vision."

But opponents of the venture, including environmental groups and business interests, argue that so ambitious an undertaking is unnecessary and far more costly than the initial price indicates. They favor the construction of more reservoirs, cisterns, wells and aqueducts, which they contend would be cheaper and more efficient than building the canals and compromising the flow of a river already damaged by pollution and deforestation.

"The problem of the northeast is not the scarcity of water, but the way that water is managed and existing projects left unfinished," Renato Cunha, director of the Bahia Environmental Group, said in an interview in Salvador, the state capital. "This plan is not going to solve the problem. It will only exacerbate existing conflicts over who controls land and water."

Traditionally, Brazil has looked to gargantuan public works to resolve many of its social and economic ills. The Trans-Amazon Highway, the Itaipú Dam and the Angra dos Reis nuclear power plants are all examples of megaprojects that were meant to transform the country but, in the opinion of many Brazilians, ended up bringing as many problems as benefits.

The São Francisco, sometimes called "Brazil's Nile," and the vast hinterland of sand and scrub around it, known as the sertão, hold a special place in the Brazilian imagination. The droughts that have regularly afflicted the region since the 19th century have forced millions of peasants south to cities like São Paulo to seek jobs, a migration akin to that of poor American blacks leaving the South to work in the factories of Chicago and Detroit.

Mr. da Silva is himself among those migrants, having been driven from his birthplace in Pernambuco as a child. When he talks of the region's perennial water shortage and the resulting poverty and social distortions, it is always in strongly emotional and personal terms. He has a clear disdain for the traditional political bosses, called colonels, who use their control of the water supply to control votes and expand their landholdings.

His government, in fact, has been promoting the proposal as a way to ensure a reliable water supply for poor people and their animals, while accusing opponents of selfishness. "It is a humanitarian issue" and "a question of solidarity," Mr. da Silva said recently.

Opponents of the proposal, though, maintain that the talk of helping the poor is a smoke screen. Much - if not most - of the water, they contend, will actually go to fruit growing projects deeper in the interior, for irrigation, or to shrimp farms, two of the fastest-expanding export industries in this part of the country.

But Fernando Bezerra Coelho, the mayor of Petrolina and a supporter of Mr. da Silva's governing coalition, contended that

even that goal would be misguided and would lack economic logic. "Why irrigate 100,000 acres that are hundreds of miles from the river when you can irrigate a much larger area right around here at a much lower cost?" he said in an interview here.

The proposed project predates the current administration, and before Mr. da Silva's party came to power in 2003, it vigorously opposed the plan, calling it a waste of money that would wrongly benefit a rich elite at the expense of the general population. A confidential party document made available to The New York Times by someone who had access to them through connections with the Brazilian Congress criticized the idea that "the only solution to the problem is transferral" and concluded that reforestation and better use of underground aquifers could "allay the regimen of a lack of rain."

But next year is an election year, and Mr. da Silva is expected to seek a second four-year term. The water diversion project promises to be a boon for a handful of construction companies that are among the biggest campaign donors in the country and have been chafing at the government's restrictions on big public works projects, imposed to help meet budget surplus targets promised to the International Monetary Fund.

"This is clearly being done for electoral purposes," said Ana Cacilda Rezende Reis, a lawyer who belongs to the Permanent Forum for the Defense of the São Francisco. "It's popular with voters, who have been misled as to who is really going to get the water, but even more so with the people who are going to get the construction contracts."

Mr. Gomes, whose home state stands to be one of the principal beneficiaries of the project, said such accusations are "unjust." He noted that Mr. da Silva announced his intention to divert the water during his first month in office, and attributed delays in carrying out the project to "our desire to negotiate with opponents and incorporate some of their suggestions into the project."

As things now stand, the project has no foreign financing and will be paid for entirely out of the government budget, unusual for a venture on so grand a scale. The previous administration had contacted the World Bank in hopes of securing its support, but those efforts fizzled after the bank did an analysis that turned out to be highly critical of a version of the plan that opponents say differs little from what Mr. da Silva is now proposing.

"The project would have little effect on the cost of emergency water supply during drought years," the report concluded. "Secure supplies of household water for the entire northeast could be guaranteed by alternatives at a fraction of the cost of the proposed project."

As originally conceived, the river transfer plan also envisaged replenishing the São Francisco with water from the Tocantins, a river that feeds into the Amazon basin, by reversing the course of a tributary and building a canal of about 200 miles through the heart of the country. Though that part of the project, seen as the most costly and least popular, has been delayed, it has not been canceled.

"This will be done in the future, but not before 2050," Mr. Gomes said. "We have to have a hierarchy of priorities so that we don't have water going to waste before the users of it are in place."

Spread over nine states and hundreds of thousands of square miles, the 50 million residents of the northeast are suspicious by nature and experience. Over the years, they have seen one project after another begun and then abandoned with a change of government, or witnessed others bring unexpected problems.

For example, the Sobradinho Dam just west of here, built by the military dictatorship and inaugurated in 1978, was supposed to bring jobs and light to residents of the region. It did do that for some, but it also devastated fishing, blocked navigation and ended the cyclical flooding essential to agriculture along the banks of the river.

"The river commerce and shipping that used to animate the economy is dead, and you've got settlements two miles from the river bank that depend on water trucks," said Misael Aguilar Silva, the mayor of Juazeiro and the son of a river pilot. "The river is sick, and this project is only going to make it sicker. It's like forcing an anemic person to donate blood."