

Community in the Brazilian Amazon without water for three months after Canadian-owned Equinox Gold's Aurizona dam collapse

Brazilian court sets deadline for the company to prove it has re-established water supply. Despite evidence, Equinox Gold refuses to acknowledge its responsibility.

(Ottawa/Montréal, June 25, 2021) - A [Brazilian court determined](#) that Canadian company Equinox Gold Corp. should guarantee the supply of drinking water to more than four thousand people in the district of Aurizona, located in Godofredo Viana, Maranhão, in the Brazilian Amazon.

The community has been without regular and adequate access to water for three months, since a dam at the Canadian company's gold mine ruptured contaminating the main source of water. On May 31st the court in the municipality of Cândido Mendes, Maranhão, accepted the request from the State's Public Ministry and ordered a daily fine of 500 thousand reais (CAD \$125,371) if the company fails to comply.

On March 25, the Juiz de Fora reservoir,, was contaminated by mud after the failure of a sediment dam at the Mineração Aurizona (MASA) gold mine, owned by Canadian Equinox Gold Corp. Since then, many of the more than 1,500 families in Aurizona have shared [videos and photos](#) documenting the irregularity of the company's water delivery and that the water provided is causing skin rashes for many people. Three months after the dam collapsed, the community does not have access to any technical data to support the company's claims that the water supplied does not contain toxic substances.

The company has chosen to deny its responsibility rather than addressing community demands and requests from the state of Maranhao and courts. Despite the evidence and official documents from Brazilian government agencies, Equinox Gold says these are "[total lies](#)".

The company insists that "[there was no tailings dams failure](#)", but "[an overflow... of a fresh water pond on \(their\) property known as Lagoa do Pirocaua](#)". However, a report launched in April by the [National Mining Agency](#) (ANM) confirms that the structure that collapsed on May 25th is classified as a mining dam, despite having the name of Lagoa de Pirocaua. As a result, the ANM ordered the company to [close the dam](#), which had not been registered by Equinox Gold .

According to Dalila Calisto, from the leadership team of the Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB), "the company avoids using the term dam failure so as not to deter investors, who might draw parallels with the emblematic cases of Brumadinho (2019) and Mariana (2015), in Minas Gerais".

The company also continues to [claim that an atypical level](#) of rainfall during this period was the cause of the disaster. According to statements released by the company, around 426 mm of rain fell in the region that day, a phenomenon that it characterized as a "decamillennial" rainfall, meaning a recurrence every 10,000 years. However, a search in the local press and [maps](#) of official meteorological agencies show that no exceptional event was registered in the newspapers and that this volume of rain continued throughout the month of March, contradicting the company's statements.

The community has organized protests to demand their basic right to water, which is even more critical as Brazil is one of the hardest hit countries by the pandemic in the world with more than 500.000 people dead by Covid-19. According to Juciara Pereira Lima, from the Committee of Affected People in Aurizona, “no one here is happy to be protesting. We are being forced to do this because our situation is unsustainable.”

On April 26th, during a protest to mark the one month anniversary of the dam failure, military police from Maranhão detained two women community leaders. Maria Aldineia and Maria Valdirene were illegally held in police custody for five hours in a police vehicle. The women were released, but they say they continue to receive threats. The Secretary of Public Security is investigating the situation.

According to [Jonias Pinheiro](#), this disaster sheds light on a pattern of systematic human rights violations that began with the arrival of the mining company in the region 10 years ago.

[The company controls the municipality](#): police, universities, municipal government. There have been cases of criminalization and even assassination of social leaders. The company acts as if all Aurizona district is its private property, preventing local residents from catching crabs and collecting fruits - the traditional source of livelihood for families in the region. Residents that are caught practicing these activities are taken by private security guards to the police. One thing is very clear: these kinds of megaprojects are always accompanied by violence against women, prostitution and illicit activities. It is very important to spread the word about what is happening here throughout the world, including in Canada, the company is headquartered.

Community members have been sounding the alarm about the [stability of the mine](#). In 2018, a landslide of waste rock swept the road away, blocking access to the community and affecting mangrove habitats and natural water streams nearby. As one resident said after the dam rupture, we “[need support because at any moment there could be a tailings dam rupture. If that happens, we are in danger.](#)”

In May, more than [60 international and Brazilian civil society organizations](#) sent a letter to the company and Brazilian officials requesting that the community's demands be met. Among the most urgent requests is the restoration of drinking water and compensation for the losses caused to the local economy by the contamination of reservoirs in the region, including businesses and fishing and tourism activities.

For more information on the Aurizona case:

For more information on mine dam regulation:

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