

Open Letter to His Excellency the Governor of Bahia

Dear Governor Rui Costa dos Santos:

My very best regards.

I am writing to convey to you the deep respect and solidarity I feel for the people of the Northeast of Brazil, in particular the people of Bahia. I am also writing out of my great esteem for you. I am sure your will take my letter kindly.

The coast of Northeast Brazil may be undergoing one of the worst and largest world environmental catastrophes with oil in the world. According to the latest estimates, there have been oil spills, or signs thereof, in 204 beaches of 78 municipalities of nine States: Alagoas, Bahia, Ceará, Maranhão, Paraíba, Pernambuco, Piauí, Rio Grande do Norte e Sergipe¹. In these areas live more than 144 thousand fisherwomen and fishermen whose lives and livelihood are severely impacted and threatened. According to information from the Postgraduate Program in Health, Environment, and Work of the Medical School of UFBA², contact with oil causes severe and chronic risks that may result in death by intoxication. These areas are also very rich in water biodiversity, such as mangroves, river mouths, and coral reefs, which are crucial for the sustainability of the fishing activities and reproduction of sea life. All this wealth is being severely affected.

I am well acquainted with the Island of Maré in Salvador, a good example of said areas, which has been suffering such environmental pollution for decades, but whose noble and brave population stubbornly insists on living and fighting for their rights and the protection of nature. In the course of my many visits to Maré I have culled from the community an extraordinarily lesson of dignity and tenacity in their struggle to preserve their ways of life and their communal economy. I was so impressed by this experience that it will be forever engraved in my mind. I was particularly moved because I realized that, fighting for the quality of their lives, the women and men of Maré were fighting as well for the quality of life of all of us. They were doing so in the worst possible conditions, amidst discriminations, silencings, and misunderstandings, thus stirring in me a profound feeling of injustice and a strong desire to be not just solidary with this community but rather to be totally part of it.

It is in this spirit that I write to you. I see myself today as a member of this heroic community and am proud to be part of it. Their cry of revolt before the devastation of their territory and their means of livelihood is also my cry. I add my cry to their cry hoping that together we may be heard by you.

As of this moment, the causes of the largest environmental disaster acknowledged in the Brazilian coast are unknown. As the oil spills spread, there is

¹ <https://www.ibama.gov.br/notas/2047-manchas-de-oleo-no-litoral-do-nordeste>

² <https://sat.ufba.br/pt-br/nota-do-ppgsat-sobre-contaminacao-por-petroleo-na-costa-do-brasil>

more and more criticism of the way the federal government deals with the disaster, with no contingency plans whatsoever. The response of the Brazilian State has been precarious, particularly as regards the federal government. Proof of this is the lack of basic conditions to support the large number of volunteers from the local populations of the Northeast beaches who gathered together and take action, and have been collecting the oil without any proper equipment and means of individual protection, such as gloves, for example.

The artisanal fishing communities are highly knowledgeable of the sea world and fully aware that they depend on it for their survival. By means of an open letter,³ they demand to participate in the operations of contamination monitoring and contingency planning. They do not wish to wait passively for their own extermination. In view of the omissions of the State, they have decided to fight for life in the sea and in their land, as was the case of the occupation of the IBAMA in Bahia. In the meantime, what we witness is their marginalization as guardians of water biodiversity and as subjects who are extremely knowledgeable about the ecosystem dynamics of their territories.

Whereas the Federal Government not merely neglects but even opposes environmental protection, I do beseech you, Mr. Governor, to provide ample and detailed information about the whole process of mitigation of this environmental crime and to see that the fisherwomen and fishermen are invited to join the unified command established in the State to take care of the environmental crime by together reaching solutions for the preservation of life. In my view, their participation is decisive to guaranty the democratic legitimacy of the Government of Bahia and show the people of Bahia as well as the international community that your government is committed to go beyond empty promises.

Sincerely,



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Coimbra, 27 October 2019

³ <https://www.cese.org.br/movimento-de-pescadores-as-ocupam-sede-do-ibama-em-salvador-para-cobrar-medidas-sobre-derramamento-de-oleo-no-estado-da-bahia/>