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A man in Cabo de Santo Agostinnho, Brazil, shows a crab covered in oil Oct. 20, 2019, as he and others work to clean the site of an oil spill. A group of 100, including 21 bishops, released a public letter Feb. 18 criticizing the Lula administration's plans for oil exploration near the mouth of the Amazon River. (CNS/Reuters/Diego Nigro)



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A group of 100 scientists, environmentalists, social activists and Catholics — including 21 bishops — released a public letter Feb. 18 criticizing the Lula administration's plans for oil exploration near the mouth of the Amazon River.

The letter states that oil exploration near the coast of the Amazonian state of Amapá in the northern part of Brazil would be "ecological suicide," and it urges an immediate reduction in the production and consumption of fossil fuels.

According to the signatories, not only would producing oil in that area be risky for local biomes, but also it would mean the continuation of an economic model that releases an excessive amount of carbon into the atmosphere, which contributes to greenhouse gas emissions that trap heat and warm the planet.

Bishop Vicente de Paula Ferreira of the Diocese of Livramento de Nossa Senhora, Bahia, is one of the most active bishops in denouncing the impacts of extractivist activities on the Earth and traditional populations.

"The government's rhetoric is based on a capitalistic mindset of unlimited profits. But the planet doesn't have resources for unlimited growth anymore. We have to protect what's left," said the bishop, who leads the National Conference of the Bishops of Brazil's Special Commission for Mining and Integral Ecology.

Italian-born Fr. Dario Bossi, a member of the commission, said the group wanted the church to play a significant role among the letter's signatories, so it looked for the support of bishops from all regions of Brazil.

"It shows that it's not only a social segment that's criticizing the government's project, but a complex alliance with different actors," he said.



Fr. Dario Bossi, provincial superior of the Comboni Missionaries in Brazil, Patiachi Taylor and Leah Rose Casimero leave the final session of the Synod of Bishops for the Amazon at the Vatican Oct. 26, 2019. (CNS/Paul Haring)

The idea of prospecting oil in the so-called Equatorial Margin — a region that encompasses the Brazilian coast from Rio Grande do Norte to Amapá and beyond to French Guiana, Suriname and Guyana — is not new.

Since 2014, the state oil company Petrobras has requested authorization from the government's environmental agency Ibama on several occasions to explore the region's oil reserves. The effort faced significant political struggle starting in 2023, during President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's first year in his third tenure, though some controversy had existed prior.

After the ecological destruction of former President Jair Bolsonaro's administration (2019–2022), much of Lula's campaign focused on the pledge of rebuilding Brazil's environmental protection policies. Marina Silva, a longtime conservationist who

began her political activism alongside the Amazonian icon Chico Mendes (1944–1988), was appointed by Lula as minister of the environment and climate change.

Marina Silva and Lula worked together during his first and second tenures (2003–2006, 2007–2010), but she left the government in 2008 due to disagreements over the president's policies, especially the construction of hydroelectric plants in Amazonian rivers.

With Ibama's refusal to give a license to Petrobras for the exploration of oil in Amapá, Marina Silva — whose ministry encompasses Ibama — and Lula have been again on opposing sides.



Water flows in at the point where the river meets the sea in the Bailique Archipelago, district of Macapa, state of Amapa, northern Brazil, on Sept. 12, 2022. (AP photo/Eraldo Peres, File)

"The Ibama categorized the operation as one of maximum risk, according to their criteria. That's an extremely rich region from a biological point of view," Luiz Marques, a history professor at the State University of Campinas and one of the major organizers of the public letter, told the National Catholic Reporter.

Marques, who studies the ecological impacts of the current economic system and in 2020 authored a book titled *Capitalism and Environmental Collapse*, emphasized that Amapá's coast has an enormous concentration of phytoplankton, produced by the nutritive sediments released into the sea by the Amazon River. The phytoplankton absorb atmospheric carbon.

"It's also one of the largest regions of mangroves in the world, besides having a vast concentration of coral reefs," he said.

The government's environmental agency argued that Petrobras failed to provide fundamental information on how it would contain potential oil spills. The letter says Ibama listed 18 negative impacts if oil exploration is carried out in the region, four of them of high magnitude. The region's marine streams would rapidly spread the spilled oil to the whole region, including French Guiana's coast.

The oil company argued it has included all requested information in a new revision to the project, which Ibama has been evaluating since November 2024.

On Feb. 12, during an event, Lula complained about the time Ibama is taking to analyze the request. He claims the project is only to explore oil reserves in the area, not to start oil production.



Pope Francis and Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva meet privately on the margins of the Group of Seven summit in Borgo Egnazia, in Italy's southern Puglia region, on June 14, 2024. (CNS/Vatican Media)

The letter mentions other moves by Lula's government that go against his promises, like adhesion to a group of collaborators of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (known as OPEC+) and the project — expressed in a document of Lula's Ministry of Mining and Energy in 2023 — to make Brazil the fourth largest oil producer in the world.

"Brazilian journalist Eliane Brum defined that perspective as a kind of 'progressive denialism.' We have world leaders like President Donald Trump that deny the existence of climate change. The other group — with members like Lula — acknowledge science's warnings, but fail to comply with them in the name of a 20th-century agenda," Marques said.

Lula and other members of his administration argue that the money generated by oil exploitation will benefit the poorest in Brazil and will be used to finance energy transition in the country.

"It's a great mistake. We know there's nothing left for the people after oil drilling and mining devastate their territories," Ferreira told NCR.

Marques agrees. He said that only one percent of the resources connected to oil production have been used globally to fund energy transition. In Brazil, a bit more than 30 percent of the income generated by oil goes to the state, the rest goes to shareholders. And the state gains, in general, are not reverted to public policies, but are used to finance the public debt with banks.

The bishops' mining and integral ecology commission has been promoting, along with other organizations, a series of activities in order to raise awareness regarding the environmental emergency in Brazil leading up to the 2025 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP30), which will take place in Belém, Pará state, in November.

"Unfortunately, at the same time that Brazil will host the COP30, it's pursuing an authorization for oil exploration in the Amazon and part of the Congress wants to liberate mining in Indigenous lands," Ferreira said.

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Bossi, the priest, said the commission is not hopeful about COP30's outcomes.

In the face of climate denialism from Trump and other world leaders, he said the COP can only "be a success if it keeps existing as a space of international dialogue and negotiation."

But the commission is optimistic about the possibilities of reaching out to a larger Brazilian public over the year and talking about the current environmental challenges.

"We also hope to be able to resist projects like that of oil exploration in the Amazon," he added.

According to Bossi, oil exploration projects have been sacrificing alternatives involving local economies that could bring food sovereignty to communities and at the same time help to balance biodiversity and climate. For example, the government could incentivize Brazil nuts' production by small, traditional communities in parts of the Amazon, instead of producing more oil.

As a way of resisting oil exploration projects, the commission has been promoting the idea of mining free and oil free zones.

"The Amazon as a whole should be one of those free zones, especially when we see the impacts of oil drilling on the rainforest in Peru or Ecuador, for instance," Bossi said.

In Bossi's opinion, Brazil is suffocating the leadership in ecological matters that it could have during COP30.

Marques thinks the social groups who oppose oil exploration in the Equatorial Margin must try as hard as possible to debate such issues with the society.

"I'm sure people are not understanding exactly the seriousness of our situation," he said. "Nobody wants a worse future. We must act."