

Brazilian bishop ends hunger strike to protest water project

SOBRADINHO, Brazil - Brazilian Bishop Luiz Cappio of Barra announced he was ending a 23-day hunger strike that protested a \$3.7 billion project to divert the Sao Francisco River.

The 61-year-old bishop sat in a wheelchair Dec. 20 during an evening Mass celebrated by Bishop Jose da Cruz of Juazeiro. Bishop Cappio had been hospitalized Dec. 19 after losing consciousness. He was released from the hospital late Dec. 20 for the Mass, but returned afterward.

Local media said about 500 people attended the Mass in this town near the river, which has been the site of the protest by the bishop, the Catholic Church's Pastoral Land Commission and various grass-roots groups.

In a message read during the Mass, Bishop Cappio said he had listened "with deep respect to the appeal from my relatives, friends and brothers and sisters in the struggle, who accompany me and who want me alive and fighting for life."

Family members, the Vatican and other bishops had asked Bishop Cappio to give up his fast, saying he had succeeded in calling attention to the issue.

But President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva insisted the project would continue, and on Dec. 19 the Supreme Court overturned a lower-court ruling that had halted construction.

In his message to supporters, Bishop Cappio said he would continue to oppose the project, which will divert water from the Sao Francisco River through 435 miles of

canals in drought-plagued northeastern Brazil. The government says the project will provide water to 12 million people, but opponents say it will mainly benefit export agriculture.

“Our greater struggle is to guarantee the life of the Sao Francisco River and its people, guarantee access to water and to true development for all of the people in the entire semiarid region, not just part of it,” the bishop said.

Bishop Cappio, who noted that he had celebrated the 36th anniversary of his priestly ordination the previous day, said he sought to work for “a future where everyone, with no exception, has bread to eat, water to drink, land to work, dignity and civic rights.”

He called for renewed discussion of the Sao Francisco River project.

“We need to broaden the debate, spread reliable information, make our mobilization grow until we defeat this project of death and win true development for the semiarid region and the Sao Francisco River,” he said.