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# Avatar director James Cameron speaks out against Belo Monte dam



Hannah Strange, Caracas

A real-life *Avatar* conflict is playing out in the Brazilian Amazon as indigenous groups fight against the construction of a giant hydroelectric dam in the heart of the rainforest, the Oscar-winning director James Cameron has warned.

The planned Belo Monte dam, approved in February, has drawn fury from environmental and Indian groups who say it will destroy a vast area of rainforest and the way of life of dozens of indigenous communities.

As the Brazilian Government prepares to open the project to bids, the director of the sci-fi phenomenon has become an international champion of the campaign against it, and of the tribes which he says are ready to lay down their lives to protect their lands.

"I'm drawn into a situation where a real-life *Avatar* confrontation is in progress," Mr Cameron said as he arrived in Brazil along with the film's stars Sigourney Weaver and Joel David Moore. "What's happening in *Avatar* is happening in Brazil and places like India and China, where traditional villages are displaced by big infrastructure projects," he said, referring to the film's depiction of a conflict on the fictional planet of Pandora between the Na'vi race and a human army bent on exploiting its minerals.

Mr Cameron attended protests in the capital, Brasilia, on Monday before travelling with the actors up the Xingu river, the Amazon tributary where the dam is planned, to visit indigenous communities.

He said Belo Monte was "going to be an ecological disaster" and insisted that "the knowledge of indigenous people, who learned how to live with nature" was one of Brazil's greatest resources.

Mr Cameron is not the first celebrity to throw the international spotlight on to the project, originally planned 20 years ago but abandoned amid widespread criticism at home. That campaign was spearheaded internationally by the British rock star Sting, who returned to Brazil in November to urge the government to listen to tribal leaders.

The £11 billion dam would be the third largest in the world, with a generating capacity of 11 Gigawatts; a contribution the government says is vital to meeting rising energy needs. But critics note it will flood 500 square kilometres of rainforest and divert the river's flow away from tens of thousands of indigenous people who depend on it for their survival. An estimated 20,000 people will be displaced.

Experts have questioned the project's economic viability, warning it will produce only 10-30 per cent of its capacity during the dry season and average half its projected annual output. Aviva Imhof of International Rivers said the campaign, including a number of lawsuits, had left the Government "scrambling" to find investors, with several companies pulling out ahead of the auction slated for April 20.

The Brazilian Government, however, insists it can pay for the project itself if private investment is not forthcoming. As well as Belo Monte, it plans to build up to 70 dams, roads, gas pipelines, and power grids to tap the region's resources. But Mr Cameron, who has written a letter of protest to President Lula, hopes he can bring US pressure to bear. Alluding to the Amazon's role in absorbing carbon emissions, he said he would take the case to US congressman. "It's all connected, we are all on the same planet. The winds, the maritime currents and the atmosphere do not respect the borders between countries."

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