

Brazil declares emergency after mine waste spill

November 18 2015



Mud-covered Paracatu de Baixo, buried by an avalanche of mud and mining sludge, is seen in Minas Gerais, Brazil, on November 9, 2015

Brazilian authorities declared a state of emergency Tuesday in more than 200 towns affected by a deadly mining waste spill.

The government of Minas Gerais state said the measure covered the Rio Doce river basin and all towns impacted by the avalanche of mud and

waste unleashed when two dams collapsed at the Samarco [iron ore](#) mine in Mariana 12 days ago.

The torrent of yellowish muck caused an environmental catastrophe, [contaminated drinking water](#) supplies and mostly destroyed the nearby village of Bento Rodrigues, with a toll of 10 dead and 15 missing.

Samarco is a joint venture of Australia's BHP Billiton, the world's largest mining firm, and Brazil's Vale, the biggest iron ore miner.

The spill contaminated some 500 kilometers (310 miles) of river in southeastern Minas Gerais and the neighboring state of Espirito Santo, destroying crops and killing fish, turtles and other animals.

The state of [emergency](#), which will be in effect for 180 days, gives victims access to disaster relief funds, speeds the deployment of emergency workers and cuts through local governments' red tape for infrastructure projects and purchases of medicine.

"Through this measure, municipalities will have access to state and federal resources, both financial and humanitarian," said state emergency chief Ronilson Edelvan de Sales Caldeira.

Samarco pledged Wednesday to pay \$260 million in damages as a "preliminary commitment" toward clean-up and compensation.

The courts have blocked an additional \$78 million and the government has slapped the firm with a total of \$67 million in fines, warning there will be more.

The final clean-up cost could top \$1 billion, according to Deutsche Bank.

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Citation: Brazil declares emergency after mine waste spill (2015, November 18) retrieved 6 February 2023 from <https://phys.org/news/2015-11-brazil-declares-emergency.html>

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