

# Brazil set to start river project

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**RIO DE JANEIRO, Brazil** - Officials in Brazil say they will probably start work next month on a huge river-diversion project meant to benefit millions by irrigating large sections of the country's arid northeast, despite claims it will cause widespread environmental damage.

A spokeswoman for National Integration Minister Pedro Brito confirmed on Tuesday that work on the new river channel would begin after Brazil's Environmental Protection Agency issues a license for the project, expected in February.

The \$2 billion project will create a new channel for the 1,600-mile Sao Francisco River, Brazil's fourth-largest, to irrigate much of the country's arid Sertao region.

But the project, which was first proposed in 1886, has been criticized as too costly and as damaging to the environment.

Roman Catholic Bishop Luiz Flavio Cappio held an 11-day hunger strike in 2005 in an attempt to stop diversion of the river. He called it off after the federal government agreed to open the project to further discussion.

Cappio and his supporters said the diversion would speed the river's flow toward the ocean and could cause it to dry up during parts of the year.

Brito said that President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva would personally inaugurate the project when it is launched in Cabrobo, 1,100 miles northeast of Rio de Janeiro.

He said his ministry had already transferred \$47 million to the Defense Ministry so military engineers can begin as soon as possible.

Work eventually would be taken over by private companies after competitive bidding, his office said.

The government says that changing river's course will benefit some 12 million poor people.