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## **Historic low water levels in the main rivers endanger the population. Acosta (social ministry): "Water scarcity is causing social conflicts"**

"I have been living in Paraguay for the past two years, and it has never rained." Fr. **Lorenzo Tasca**, *fidei donum* missionary from the diocese of Treviso told us from Paraguay a few weeks ago. He serves in the diocese of San Juan Bautista de las Misiones, in three parishes not far from the Paraná River, the second largest in South America in terms of size and total length (almost 5,000 kilometres), which in some areas has shrunk significantly in the course of 2021. *This unprecedented phenomenon is having a devastating impact on the ecosystem, the economy and the population, especially on small farmers and fishermen, in northern Argentina and Paraguay.* Water levels in the Rio Paraguay - the other major river running through the border between the two countries - dropped to historic lows. At the same time, temperatures remain steadily above 40 degrees Celsius in the summer months, with frequent wildfires, especially in Paraguay. *"The Region of the great rivers above the vast Guaraní aquifer is clearly hit by an unprecedented environmental crisis",* **Raúl Aramendy**, a human rights and climate activist, member of SERPAJ, the Peace and Justice Service founded by Nobel Prize laureate Adolfo Pérez Esquivel, and of CEAAL (Popular Education Council of Latin America), told SIR from Posadas (Misiones province, Argentina): "There are several overlapping causes: global climate change, the so-called Niña phenomenon, causing heat and drought across the Continent and the contrasting El Niño, which instead brings copious rainfall. Not to mention the large dams in Brazil and the impact of huge monocultures - especially soy - in northern Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay. **Argentina: the impact of climate change and monocultures on the ecosystem.** Monoculture crops are having a major impact, "not only in terms of deforestation, but also on the need for irrigation and waterways, coupled with soil depletion and pollution, such as in Argentina's 'pampa húmeda'. This kind of crop depletes the soil of potassium, a very important nutrient, aggravated by the use of fertilisers. Human activity is changing river ecosystems. There have recently been a number of piranha attacks on bathers, owing to the imminent extinction of the dorado fish, which feeds on these dangerous fish." Large rivers have also suffered the harmful effects of dredging activities to allow large ships to pass when the flow is normal." *In short, not only are rivers drying up, but the little water there is is polluted and poorly managed.* Aramendy mentions the consequences for small-scale fisheries, unable to fish in rivers whose ecosystems have been disrupted, and for farmers, caught in the crossfire of multinational soy companies and climate change. **Mario Nieto**, a sociologist presently working with Caritas in the Argentine city of Puerto Iguazú, situated on the border with Paraguay and Brazil, as well as with Caritas Argentina, confirms the dramatic situation. "The water levels of the river are very low, and it's one of the hottest places in the southern hemisphere. The abrupt climate change is seriously affecting crops, such as tobacco, as well as small farmers and herders, many of whom are subsistence farmers. Fisheries are also struggling, and lagoons that used to provide spawning grounds for fish are disappearing. In addition, this problem is also affecting tourism. *This has become one of the poorest areas in Argentina, exceeding the national average of 45%, and many people are migrating to the cities.* GM crops (corn and soybean) are spreading throughout the area." Caritas is trying to help "small farmers with dedicated projects", but it would also be useful to activate international cooperation initiatives, Nieto concludes. **Paraguay: fishermen and campesinos on their knees.** A similar - indeed worse - situation exists in Paraguay, marked by greater poverty and inequality. "We are facing extreme heat," confirms **Roque Acosta**, in charge of social ministry for the Paraguayan Church. *Drought comes on top of other problems, such as deforestation, wildfires, violence and in some cases the killing of social leaders and campesinos, and the expansion of intensive farming.* Large companies are seizing large quantities of water for themselves, while small farmers are losing 60% of their harvest. But large corporations are also struggling, and the impact is rippling all across the economy. Never would we have imagined that Paraguay, rich in rivers and lakes, and located above an underground reservoir

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such as the Guaraní, would be hit by drought. All that had to be done was to dig 30-metre wells and there was plenty of water available. But this is the situation today, and the aquifers are polluted.

### **Water scarcity is causing social conflicts”,**

as seen on January 22 in the agricultural centre of Aguapety, where "a social leader was killed while spearheading a protest with small farmers against the diversion of a water stream by rice producers so that it would reach their crops." **Diosnel Sánchez**, social pastoral care coordinator for the diocese of San Juan Bautista de las Misiones, bordering both Rio Paraguay and Rio Paraná, confirms: "The two rivers have virtually no more water, the temperature here rises to 42 degrees Celsius every day. The drought is affecting the local population and animals, and of course also businesses. Local fishermen are the hardest hit, of course, but the situation is also very difficult for the campesinos. As a Church, we strive to assist these people and, at the same time, raise awareness on the care of creation." Roque Acosta points out: "It is necessary to re-finance projects for small farmers and livestock breeders. We have had meetings with other organisations, but given our limited resources it's very hard to develop a working plan, while policymakers are showing little interest in the most needy population segments. Meanwhile, there is an ongoing controversy over the large Itaipú dam, which bars the course of the Paraná river on the border between Brazil and Uruguay, and powers the world's largest hydroelectric plant, which supplies electricity to São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro. A "secret agreement", signed in May 2019, was widely contested because in the opinion of many, the agreement committed Paraguay to purchasing more energy than it needed. In a motion, Senate forced Paraguay's Government to review the agreement. "However," Acosta affirms, "this is a separate issue from the problem of drought and, if anything, it concerns compensation for Paraguay." (\*) *journalist at "La voce del popolo"*

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