Brazilian Antarctic Operation (OPERANTAR) - OPERANTAR XXXIX (2020/2021) and OPERANTAR XL (2021/2022)

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OPERANTAR XXXIX (2020/2021)

OPERANTAR XL (2021/2022)

***Summary***

The years 2020-2021 has posed many challenges for the national Antarctic programs, affecting the transport of scientists and supplies to Antarctica, and the necessary support provided to Antarctic research facilities.

This information paper presents the activities carried out by Brazil during its XXXIX Antarctic Operation (OPERANTAR), including changes and adjustments caused by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, and the planning for 2021/2022 XL Antarctic Operation.

***2020/2021 Antarctic Operation (OPERANTAR XXXIX)***

The XXIX Antarctic Operation (OPERANTAR XXIX) began in October 2020 with the departure of the two Brazilian Navy ships - the Polar Ship “Almirante Maximiano” and the Oceanographic Support Ship “Ary Rongel” - from Rio de Janeiro to the Brazilian Comandante Ferraz Antarctic Station, after a 14-day quarantine on board. Both vessels returned to Brazil in December for change of personnel and cargo loading. After a new quarantine period, the vessels set sail for Antarctica in January 2021 and returned to Rio de Janeiro in April 2021.

During the 2020/2021 campaign, the Brazilian Antarctic Program (PROANTAR) reduced its overall activity in Antarctica by 45%, focusing on the logistics to resupply Comandante Ferraz Antarctic Station, change of the winter staff, maintenance of refuges and adaptation of the systems of the Station.

Given the extraordinary circumstances of the 2020/2021, PROANTAR moved less people south. In 2019/2020, for example, 250 Brazilian scientists were in Antarctica, but this season no scientists went to the southernmost Continent. Therefore the number of logistics personnel was almost 20% less than in regular Brazilian Antarctic Operations.

Scientific activities were reduced by almost 90%, and only projects that could not be postponed, hydrographic surveys and automatic and remote data collection were carried out during 2020/2021. There were no scientific field activities led by Brazil in Antarctica during this season.

Due to the pandemic situation, PROANTAR implemented additional protocols in the 2020/2021 season, including mandatory 14-day quarantines on board at all ports where personnel were embarked; health checks and COVID tests for every person going to Antarctica; intensification of preventive hygiene measures; cleaning and disinfection procedures for all cargo transported by the Brazilian vessels “Ary Rongel” and “Almirante Maximiano”; besides, no crew members were allowed to disembark the vessel at foreign ports.

These measures forced PROANTAR to be less collaborative this season than previous ones - about 80% less. But the Brazilian Antarctic Program cooperated with other countries, whenever possible, as was the case of the logistical support provided to Uruguay (with cargo transportation to Artigas Station) and to Peru (with equipment maintenance near Machu Picchu Station).

PROANTAR reported no COVID-19 cases in Antarctica. The Brazilian Antarctic Program believes that quarantine, massive testing, less movement of people to/from the southern region and compliance with national and international health protocols are responsible for PROANTAR’s success in preventing the spread of COVID-19 virus in Antarctica.

As in previous winters, only scientific projects with remote data collection will be carried out at Ferraz Station from March to October 2021. Only 16 military personnel from the Station’s staff will winter in the Brazilian Antarctic Station.

***2021/2022 Antarctic Operation (OPERANTAR XL)***

For the Antarctic summer season 2021/2022, PROANTAR is planning to resume its normal Antarctic Operation, if sanitary conditions allow that. Given the continuing restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, PROANTAR is considering 3 possible scenarios for the next campaign:

* A normal or almost normal Antarctic Operation, including 6 Brazilian Air Force C-130 flights to King George Island, flexibility to exchange personnel at foreign ports that are gateways to Antarctica, and the same amount of logistics and scientific activities as in previous years.
* A reduced Antarctic Operation due to national and international sanitary protocols, with very few scientific and logistics activities, without personnel changes at foreign ports and without flights to Antarctica.
* An intermediate alternative, with less people moving south on ships and planes, sufficient scientific and logistics activities (but less than in a normal Antarctic Operation), although some restrictions still apply – such as required vaccination and quarantine.

PROANTAR is following the evolution of the situation concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, the recommendations issued by governments and Antarctic organizations, and will make the necessary adjustments until October, when the Brazilian summer activities in Antar