

Aruba, June 4, 2012 - Brazil's biggest open-air landfill has been closed on the outskirts of Rio de Janeiro after 34 years in operation. The Jardim Gramacho dump, a mountain of rubbish near the city's main airport, will be replaced by a modern recycling plant.

The move, while welcomed by environmentalists, is expected to leave more than 1,700 people out of work.

For decades, rubbish pickers have made their living by manually selecting materials to be recycled.

A small group of pickers, known locally as "catadores," joined Brazilian environmental minister Izabella Teixeira and Rio mayor Eduardo Teixeira in a brief ceremony to mark the end of the facility.

"Gramacho will become a reference in sustainable development and an example to be followed by other dumps in Brazil," said minister Izabella Teixeira. The decision to close Gramacho, postponed several times, comes only weeks before the United Nations conference on the environment, Rio+20, which begins on 20 June.

Sea pollution

For decades, environmentalists have denounced the open-air landfill, which received 9,000 tonnes of rubbish a day. The rotting rubbish generates greenhouse gases, which will now be turned into fuel.

Run-off from the piles of rubbish also leaked into the nearby sea, adding to the pollution in Rio's Guanabara Bay. The "catadores" were paid to pluck from the smelly piles of rubbish whatever pieces could be used for recycling.

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