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Honduran Land-Ownership Struggle Increasing, Campesinos More Aware of Rights, Landowners More Aggressive

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Land ownership in Honduras has long been a source of social conflict between the rich minority in possession of most of the land and the poor majority in dire need of it. In this Central American nation of almost 8.3 million people, whose total area is slightly more than 112,000 sq km and whose land area is almost 111,900 sq km—barely larger than the state of Tennessee—93% of which is arable, some 12 wealthy families own most of the rich soil throughout the country.

Miguel Facussé tops the list, with thousands of hectares nationwide to his name, and is singled out by human rights organizations as responsible for most of the violence against campesinos who are claiming unused land for their survival.

Historically exploited, campesinos have been denied land ownership and have suffered repression for trying to uphold their rights and for trying unsuccessfully to make major terratenientes (landowners) respect them. For campesinos, it is a harsh story of violence, repression, killings, dispossession, injustice, helplessness; but it is also one of tenacity, of conviction.

For the past several years, particularly since the 2009 coup (NotiCen, July 2, 2009), violence against campesinos has been on the rise, and dozens have been killed in just the past two years.

Attention has been centered on the northern Bajo Aguán region (NotiCen, Nov. 17, 2011), where landowner repression has been extensively reported on, but that is not the only place where increasing violence has been taking place. The eastern Olancho department bordering Nicaragua, an island in the southern Gulf of Fonseca, and the area around the capital Tegucigalpa are also scenes of tension and violence.

Situation repeats itself over time
Vast extensions of land are not used. Campesinos want some of that land to be distributed among them. As their pleas are not heard, they carry out actions of land recovery, taking over what they need for living and settling there. Owners consider their property illegally invaded, and thus resort to force, having the Army, the Policía Nacional, and their own security personnel clear the fields.

At times, agreements are reached for owners to sell land to the government—the Instituto Nacional Agrario (INA)—for the INA to distribute it among campesinos, but the problem persists when accords are not complied with and campesinos end up landless, as human rights organizations point out.

And the cycle restarts
Voicing concern about the situation, the Consejo Hondureño de la Empresa Privada (COHEP)—the country’s private-sector leadership—recently said land takeovers are wearing out the economy.
and bringing grief to people. In a communiqué handed out during a press conference last month, COHEP said such actions are "carried out by people and groups who are…promoting property invasions, trying to destabilize tranquility and investment in the country."

The organization expressed support "for justice officials acting in full compliance with the country's laws in maintaining order and legal security," and demanded that "action in compliance with the law be taken against...invaders."

"We agree that campesinos who have not benefitted from land distribution have access to land within a legal framework. Our proposal since 2008 has been the creation of a land bank, a short-term solution that the Instituto Nacional Agrario officials have agreed with," said COHEP.

During the press conference, COHEP president Aline Flores said, "We can't go on with these unnecessary clashes, and, above all, with causing grief to people. The private sector is willing to provide technical and marketing support to production" within the framework of the proposed land bank. Flores added, "What we're seeking is not only to expand our own national investment but to attract foreign investment," which is not possible "with the takeovers."

But the campesinos are not to blame, according to human rights and other Honduran civil society organizations. Campesinos' rights are being violated by major landowners, they claim, specifically pointing to Facussé.

Bertha Oliva, head of the Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH), told NotiCen that present events were foreseeable as far back as the 1980s, when violence and repression in Honduras were basically political-ideological. And she warned that the present situation is bound to become more critical. "What's happening in Honduras was kind of expected. For one thing, because of the awful distribution of land, we always knew that, in a not so distant future, conflict in Honduras would be caused by the land problem," Oliva said.

"In the 1980s, the problem was merely ideological, ideological persecution...a political-ideological persecution," Oliva explained, referring to the at least 184 persons disappeared under military rule in Honduras, including Oliva's husband, human right activist Carlos Nativí.

"And we always saw and analyzed that future problems would come regarding land because we were watching and monitoring how voracious the owners of political power...were in Honduras. They are such a powerful caste, and they increasingly shielded themselves with impunity," said Oliva. "Impunity made them lose the capability to analyze how the people began to become aware of their rights and realize who their true enemies were."

Landowners "thought that having the armed forces—as they have them, as they’ve always had them—meant it was going to be easy to subjugate the people," Oliva said. "So, what is happening now is that there’s maturity and knowledge, added to the campesinos’ needs, and the people’s needs in general, because, in every aspect, they’re a suffocated people."

"The land problem is a real problem in the country, and a problem that I see turning worse," because "there are land takeovers, recoveries...in different parts—it’s countrywide—and the state responds in a violent way to this land recovery," with campesinos "brutally attacked," said Oliva, who warned that terratenientes "are imposing a feudal system."
The situation in Bajo Aguán is critical, and international attention has been brought to it, but in Olancho "there could a conflict as strong as that," Oliva said.

In Bajo Aguán, more than 60 peasants have been murdered in the past two years, but there have been victims on both sides, a situation in which after one or two campesinos are killed, one or two of Facussé’s security guards are killed, in what seems to be a recurring cycle, according to Oliva.

"This puts us on alert," Oliva said, pointing to the fact that it may not be the an-eye-for-an-eye situation it appears to be. "There’s so much human perversity that, regardless of the cost, they [landowners] want to sell the image that in Bajo Aguán the struggle is not for land but an outbreak of armed people wanting to take power—not land but power—through violence, and they’ve always claimed the campesinos were violent people. Because that’s the story now, that those fighting for their rights are violent and acting outside the law, and for some reason they’ve been killed. To me, the impunity they have, plus their perversity, can lead them to that, and they thus justify their argument, although what you see there is campesinos being savagely killed."

The human rights activist told the story of murdered campesino leader Matías Valle, who had a price on his head, "200,000 lempiras [just over US$10,000]. What they wanted was his head," and his community buried him in the land they were taking over "because the landowners had sworn they were going to have him taken out of the cemetery and cut off his head."

**Different area, same problems**

Besides Bajo Aguán, "if you look to the west, there are land takeovers as well...and also in the south," Oliva said. "In the south...mainly in the Zacate Grande peninsula [on the Gulf of Fonseca], they have problems with one of the same owners of Bajo Aguán...Miguel Facussé."

But there, instead of using military, police, or private security forces, repression is disguised as conflict between local campesinos—Facussé’s rural workers and landless campesinos—Oliva said. He manipulates his workers, "he brainwashes them telling them there are no jobs, that the only jobs are those he provides, and that the others come to take away those jobs," thus causing both groups to collide, "reducing the power of the land claims as well as the state’s responsibility. The is most perverse practice we’ve detected, which is being implemented in the south, in Zacate Grande."

To counter this, COFADEH, with international support, has set up a camp in the area, so far with three human rights advocates—an Italian and two Germans—to accompany the local rural communities, to report human rights abuses, "and to have them [the landowners] think twice before hurting anyone in the struggle for land," said Oliva. The idea is to set up similar camps in Bajo Aguán and other sites, she explained.

In Oliva’s opinion, "this is worse than the 1980s, although it’s similar, because it’s the same creators of the paramilitary groups and the death squads of the 1980s who are in control of the state...doing what they did in the 1980s, but now they have more knowledge, they’re more able, they have more impunity, they’ve become more sophisticated."

-- End --