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Landless Organizations Increase Protests in Brazil

by LADB Staff

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Brazil's economic problems are devastating social programs including land reform, and the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST) has stepped up its protests, which have turned violent. The World Bank has been drawn into the struggle for land reform with MST accusations that it has committed "social and political fraud" and is in collusion with wealthy landowners.

The MST, which represents about 4 million landless campesinos, has become a strong critic of the economic policies of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso. The movement has won the support of labor unions in Brazil's cities and the sympathy of a large segment of the public, but it has met violent opposition from landowners. In the past decade, about 1,000 campesinos have been killed in the struggle for land.

On March 19, Dioneia Dresch, the lawyer and spokesperson for landowners in Parana state, said landowners had planted anti-personnel mines around the perimeter of some of their properties to prevent land invasions. "In our situation, we cannot wait to see what the bandits will do without arming ourselves," said Dresch. "Everyone has bought pistols and rifles. Now someone got the idea to buy land mines."

Demonstrators protest decentralization of agrarian reform

In early April, MST national coordinator Delwek Mateus said the organization would increase its demonstrations and land takeovers to protest decentralization of agrarian reform, unemployment, and misery. Recently, various state governors signed agreements to decentralize agrarian reform. The MST has criticized those efforts. "The federal government is abandoning its responsibilities and leaving agrarian reform in the hands of the states and municipalities but without giving them money," said Mateus.

MST spokesperson Reginaldo Pacheco said the federal government has drastically cut the budget for agrarian reform to meet International Monetary Fund (IMF) requirements for the US\$41 billion financial bailout (see NotiSur, 1999-03-05, 1999-03-26). Pacheco said the cuts would reduce the payment given to each family that receives a parcel of land from US\$9,800 to US\$2,890. In late March, 6,000 families occupied 41 haciendas and sugar refineries in the northeastern state of Pernambuco, one of the poorest states in Brazil. It was the largest simultaneous land takeover to date. And, during Holy Week, about 2,800 families took over 15 haciendas in Alagoas state. Protests were held in 23 states April 16-18 to mark the third anniversary of the Para massacre.

On April 17, 1996, on a highway near El Dorado dos Carajas in the northern state of Para, more than 150 regional police and three armed civilians opened fire on protesting campesinos, killing 19 demonstrators (see NotiSur, 1996-04-26, 1997-11-21). MST protests World Bank program On April 19, about 50 MST members dragged 19 large wooden crosses to the US Consulate in Rio de Janeiro to

protest World Bank support for the Land Reform and Poverty Alleviation Pilot Project. The US\$150 million project was launched April 14 and is being carried out in the states of Ceara, Minas Gerais, Bahia, Pernambuco, and Maranhao. Its aim is to enable 15,000 families to buy plots of agricultural land. But participants must agree to steep interest rates on the loans and must forgo government food and housing programs.

The MST says campesinos are often not told the conditions until it is too late. "Because of the high interest, the loans are inappropriate even for already established farmers," says the National Forum for Land Reform and Justice in the Fields. It will be impossible for the program's intended beneficiaries to repay those debts, and it will drive up the price of agricultural land available to rural workers, critics say.

The bank failed to consult people affected by the project, withheld key operational details from their representatives, and pushed through its plans despite local resistance violating the agency's policies on poverty reduction, information disclosure, and involvement of nongovernmental organizations.

Worse still, control of the new land market is being given to state and municipal authorities linked to local landowning elites. Thus, the project is "transferring the initiative for selling land to landless rural campesinos to the speculator-landowner," the National Forum says.

Some analysts insist that the solution is not to go to the other extreme and eliminate those loans, but rather to formalize the subsidies and impose realistic interest rates, although less than those of the market.

On April 20, about 2,000 MST members clashed with about 100 police at a protest in the northeast city of Recife, and Globo TV network reported that gunshots fired in the struggle severely injured 12 policemen and four campesinos. The MST, which organized the protest in front of the Instituto Nacional de Colonizacao y Reforma Agraria (INCRA), said the police fired on the unarmed demonstrators.

President has harsh words for MST

During his European visit, Cardoso told reporters the MST protests are meant to be a show of force. "But who gains with this show of force?" asked Cardoso, adding that it is "the leaders who gain, who go to the media, which goes all over the world giving the impression that our administration is against agrarian reform, when the opposite is true."

Minister of Agrarian Policies Raul Jungmann has promised that the government will continue settling between 80,000 and 85,000 families a year, and said lower credits and more rapid "emancipation" of campesinos from dependence on benefits will help the campesinos. During Cardoso's first term (1995-1998), 287,539 families were settled, Jungmann said, surpassing the goals set for the agrarian-reform program as well as the results of the previous 30 years. But despite subsidies, many families have abandoned the land given them by the government an average of 30% quit because of the poor quality of the land.

In addition, the settlers face a lack of highways, electric, educational, and medical services, delays in receiving credit, and conflicts among themselves. Jungmann said the main concern is no longer numbers, but the "quality of the settlements," which should include schools, medical assistance, credit, and other conditions for the campesinos' insertion into the market and sustainability.

Ademar Romeiro, a researcher at the University of Campinas who participated in studies by the Ministry of Agrarian Policy and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), said one problem has been the paternalism of INCRA, whose subsidies keep the beneficiaries dependent indefinitely. Another problem is the high cost of land in Brazil, twice that of Argentina, he said.

Land values often increase even more in seizures since the owners appeal to the courts and, halfway into the process, obtain court orders that increase the compensation as much as ninefold, said Jungmann. For that reason, land distribution will be increased through market mechanisms, like caps and long-term financing, so campesinos can buy parcels directly. However, "expropriation will continue to be the principal instrument" for land reform, said Jungmann. The MST accuses the government of abandoning agrarian reform and falsifying its results. In the last four years, "it hasn't settled more than 130,000 families," said Joao Pedro Stedile, head of MST. [Sources: Associated Press, 03/02/99; Inter Press Service, 01/06/99, 03/17/99, 03/31/99; Xinhua, 04/01/99; Spanish news service EFE, 03/19/99, 03/22/99, 03/23/99, 04/05/99, 04/17/99, 04/20/99; Reuters, 04/19/99, 04/20/99]

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