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Brazil: Lula Marks 100 Days In Office

by Patricia Hynds

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After 100 days in office, President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva can tout some successes along with some frustrations. While Lula gets high marks from international financial observers for his economic policies, what matter most to the Brazilians who elected him are his social policies. Lula understands better than many of his critics that he will be unable to please everyone or resolve the country's huge problems overnight. Frequently, he reminds people that they must be patient. In a speech to the nation marking his 100 days in office, Lula said his government's most important achievement was that the world once again had confidence in Brazil. "The world believes in Brazil again," he said. "Was it a bitter remedy? I know that it was. But to change the country, really change it, many times the bitter remedy is the only alternative. Now we have to continue moving ahead, without exaggerated optimism, with the security that better days are coming." Public support remains high. After three months in office, Lula still enjoys widespread popularity, according to an opinion poll released April 2. In the survey by Ibope polling company, 75% of respondents approved of Silva's government, while 13% disapproved. Lula's personal rating was even higher, with 80% of respondents saying they trusted the president, while 16% said they did not. Lula's economic policies have also managed to win the support of many within the international financial community. "Brazil has surprised even the biggest skeptics," said Paulo Leme of Goldman Sachs. "In general, the government of Lula has high points on the political and economic fronts," said Jose Maria Barrionuevo, analyst with Barclays Capital. Ending slavery is Lula's newest social target. On March 11, Lula unveiled a plan to end modern-day slavery in Brazil, which imported more slaves than any other country in the Americas and was the last to abolish it, in 1888. The government estimates that 25,000 Brazilians work in slave-like conditions, mostly in the Amazon states of Para, Tocantins and Maranhao. Known as debt slavery, workers are lured to remote jungle ranches with promises of good incomes. Once there, they find themselves trapped in debt since they are forced to pay more for transportation, food, and tools than they earn. Those who attempt to leave are often forced back at gunpoint. "Much more than a law, what is needed is determination and political will to eradicate slavery," said Lula. He said the best way to rid Brazil of slavery was to ensure proper state oversight and stop tolerating bribes to public officials who turn a blind eye to the practice. "That time is over." At the heart of the government effort is a proposal for a constitutional amendment to allow the government to confiscate farms where slavery occurs and give the land to the former slaves to work and own. Victims also would get help with jobs and education. The government proposal calls for a sharp increase in the number of inspectors. The Ministry of Labor says that it would hire and train more than 650 new inspectors this year, who will earn good salaries and have the authority to enforce the law. Bishop Tomas Balduino, president of the Catholic Church's Comissao Pastoral da Terra (CPT), which has campaigned against slavery in Brazil for years, said eradicating slavery is "a question of political willingness." Many human rights activists blame Brazil's history of slavery for the widespread discrimination suffered by Afro-Brazilians, who represent just under half the country's population of 170 million. They also say landowners found guilty of slavery only face a fine, which is hardly ever paid. Fome zero (Zero Hunger) program gets off to slow start. Five months after Lula warned "the hungry are in a hurry" and promised immediate help, his Zero Hunger program has yielded more controversy than results. Some critics even among Lula's Partido dos

Trabalhadores (PT) have called the program paternalistic, assistentialistic, and limited. The reasons for the delay in getting the program moving range from the new government's lack of administrative experience to debates on whether the help should be as food stamps, cash, or handouts of food, and whether receipts should be required (see NotiSur, 2003-01-10). "Society is mobilized to break this vicious circle of poverty and hunger," said Jose Graziano, head of the government's new Ministry of Food Security. "There is a great deal of expectation, and we are having difficulty keeping up with it." Popular support for the program is strong, with wealthy neighborhoods organizing donation campaigns and large companies offering free services. At the moment, only two towns Guaribas and Acaua in the state of Piaui in the remote interior of the country are taking part in a pilot version of the program. By midyear, Graziano said, at least 150 cities would be taking part, with the number rising to 1,000 by year's end. Lula recently used the US-British war against Iraq to generate support for the Zero Hunger program, calling the hunger program "a war that is worthwhile." The publicity campaign began the day after the US entered Iraq, with radio and TV ads and inserts in newspapers. The ads used the anti-war feelings of most Brazilians to call for definitively ending hunger, saying "that is our war." Wages to go up Lula's government has offered workers a 20% increase in the minimum wage. Lula and the PT promised during the campaign to double the minimum wage within four years. The minimum wage in Brazil applies mainly to government workers and has a significant impact on state finances because pensions are also indexed to it. The minimum wage is largely ignored by the private sector. A third of Brazil's 176 million people live in poverty. [Sources: The New York Times, 03/14/03, 03/30/03; BBC News, 03/12/03, 04/01/03; Reuters, 03/12/03, 04/03/03; Associated Press, 03/12/03, 04/02/03, 04/07/03; Spanish news service EFE, 03/31/03, 04/07/03; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 04/03/03, 04/07/03; Notimex, 04/02/03, 04/08/03; La Opinion (Los Angeles), 04/08/03]

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