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Lula Tackles Land Issue

by LADB Staff

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On July 2, as tensions between landowners and landless campesinos increased, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva met with leaders of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST). Lula promised to step up land reform during the second half of 2003, but the meeting brought an angry response from some opposition lawmakers.

For several months after Lula took office, the MST adopted a wait-and-see attitude toward the new administration, but members have become increasingly frustrated and resumed land takeovers and other pressures to force the government to keep its pledge to implement a meaningful land reform.

Land distribution in Brazil is among the most uneven in the world, with 20% of the population owning 90% of arable land and the poorest 40% owning just 1% of the land. The MST estimates that, of the approximately 4.5 million landless campesinos in Brazil, some 120,000 families are living in makeshift camps or settlements waiting for land.

On June 24, Lula unveiled the Plano de Safra para a Agricultura Familiar, with US\$1.6 billion in credits for family farming. The plan aims to aid 1.4 million families who are small producers and includes funds to finance the 2003- 2004 harvest.

Lula said the plan was part of the government's overall effort to end misery and would primarily benefit women and young farmers who are helping with the Fome Zero (Zero Hunger) program (see NotiSur, 2003-02-21, 2003-04-11). Nevertheless, in late June, the MST reaffirmed "its commitment to fight for land reform because that is the only way to achieve peace in the countryside." The MST said so far Lula had done little to fulfill his campaign promise to give land to campesino families.

Lula said he needed time to carry out reforms that would go beyond land distribution and include infrastructure improvements, technical assistance, and farm credits. "We are morally, politically, and ethically committed to agrarian reform...which is a dream that will come true," he said.

Meanwhile, tensions between MST activists and landowners were increasing. In the southern city of Sao Gabriel in Rio Grande do Sul state, a pamphlet called on owners of crop- dusters to spray "the camps where the landless workers live with 100 liters of gasoline," so that one lighted candle could once and for all end the clamor for agrarian reform. The pamphlet was in response to a march to the city by 800 MST activists to demand that a 13,200-hectare farm be expropriated and distributed to 530 families in the area.

News reports in early June said landowners in the Guarapuava region in southern Brazil were forming militias to protect their lands from takeovers by campesinos, which in turn increased fears of violence. "The danger of a violent confrontation is real," said Jose Alberto de Freitas Iegas,

commander of the federal police in Guarapuava. "Although there have been no deaths nor injuries, the situation is very tense and I am afraid that if nothing is done, things could get out of control."

"We are not going to stand with our arms folded letting something like [land occupations] occur," said landowner Humberto Sa. "Are we armed? Of course, and I would be a hypocrite if I denied it or if I denied the existence of an armed militia."

One government minister warned of economic fallout from the invasions. Land invasions "generate a lack of confidence in investors and affect production," said Agriculture Minister Jorge Rodrigues. "If a peaceful and orderly agrarian reform does not take shape, violence between landowners and campesinos could erupt and jeopardize investments."

Invasion near presidential palace prompts meeting

When MST members invaded an 800-ha piece of land 40 km from the presidential palace in Brasilia, Lula moved a meeting with MST leaders up to July 2. "We want to hear that it is not necessary to carry out raids, to occupy public buildings, that's what we want from Lula," said one MST activist before the meeting.

Minister of Agrarian Development Miguel Rosseto said that the president considered the meeting "very positive" and said it showed that a peaceful land reform was possible. MST national coordinator Gilmar Mauro said Lula promised to analyze the 19-point list of demands from the organization. He said they did not discuss ending the land invasions, but it would be "natural" for the rural conflicts to diminish with the advance of the Plan Nacional de Reforma Agraria.

The MST demanded that the 120,000 families be settled this year and that land be provided for one million families by 2006. It also called for the government to provide credits for campesinos after they receive land and for creating cooperatives. They want the government to "expropriate haciendas planted with crops used to produce drugs, eradicate transgenic products, increase efforts to combat slave labor, and enforce laws against the illegal exploitation of natural resources."

Lula promised to promote "widespread and massive" agrarian reform beginning this semester, but did not set specific targets. For now the government will set aside available public lands for the rapid settlement of 60,000 families, said Rosseto. The government will also accelerate expropriations. Under Brazilian law, the government can confiscate idle land for agrarian reform as well as property used for cultivating illegal drugs. "We are working with a policy for the settlements. In the second half of the year, we are going to prioritize families who have been in the camps for a long time, while we build an agrarian reform that has quality and production capacity," said Rosseto.

Since Lula took office on Jan. 1, the government has expropriated 240,000 ha of fallow land for redistribution to landless farmers, said Gercino Jose da Silva, the government's agrarian advocate. He would not say how much more would be seized by the end of the year. So far, 6,000 families have received land. MST leaders praised Lula after the meeting.

"The president has promised to carry out massive land reform. That is pretty positive," said Jaime Amorim, an MST leader from Lula's home state of Pernambuco. But Humberto Sa, president of the Asociação dos Produtores Rurais of Laranjal in Parana state and a spokesman for a recently created anti-MST group, was critical of the talks. "It is totally unacceptable that the government opened its doors to a violent guerrilla group like the MST, while it has never sought to establish a dialogue with rural producers," he said.

The landowners group Uniao Democratica Ruralista (UDR) accused the government of neglect for failing to crack down on the MST. "The large landowner is forced to put his family at risk to defend his property, since the institutions don't work," said Luiz Antonio Nabhan Garcia, president of the UDR in the town of Presidente Prudente.

But Garcia denied that the UDR was promoting the creation of armed militias. Garcia said land reform should be carried out on the "agricultural frontier," such as in the "virgin Amazon," not in already developed agricultural states such as Sao Paulo and Rio Grande do Sul, where the government must "purchase expensive land rather than expropriate, because all land is already productive."

But, the MST says 838 nonproductive properties larger than 2,000 ha exist in Rio Grande do Sul enough to settle more than 100,000 families. "There are large unproductive estates all over Brazil," said MST state coordinator Miguel Stedile. "It's a myth that all the land has been developed."

On July 4, the Instituto Nacional de Colonizacao e Reforma Agraria (INCRA) said the government has enough lands for many families. "INCRA has enough lands to provide for 400,000 rural families through the agrarian reform" proposed by Lula, said INCRA official Maria Oliveira, adding that much of the land was confiscated by the Brazilian courts.

Baseball cap creates controversy

A picture of Lula in a MST baseball-type cap in the press following the meeting provided the opposition with welcome ammunition. Partido da Frente Liberal (PFL) Deputy Jose Carlos Aleluia said the PFL was going to "bring down the government." As part of that effort, he would ask for an investigation into links between the executive and the MST.

On July 3, Interior Minister Jose Dirceu said that it was "nonsense and an exaggeration" for the opposition to have made an issue of the picture of Lula wearing the cap. Dirceu said the president often puts on a cap from a group with whom he is meeting. "To receive does not mean to agree with," said Dirceu, adding that the president meets with many groups and organizations, some he agrees with and others he does not. Lula's chief of staff also urged nonviolence and cooperation regarding land reform. "The solution is agrarian reform, not repression," said Dirceu.

But the government also said it would not tolerate violence in the rural areas. "Any action that violates the law will be punished with the greatest severity, whether it is committed by the landowners or by the MST," said Justice Minister Marcio Thomaz Bastos.

On June 5, Bishop Tomas Balduino of the Comissao Pastoral da Terra (CPT) said the large landowners fear that Lula will carry out a far-reaching land reform, which has increased the number of deaths in land conflicts. "The landowners began to create militias and to arm themselves in January, when Lula took office, and that has increased the violence in the countryside," said Balduino.

CPT figures indicate that 20 people have died so far in 2003. Eleven were killed in the same period in 2002, and 43 were killed in all of 2002, the highest total since 1996. Balduino said the landowners have the support of some regional and municipal governments and have threatened to step up the violence. "It is a direct threat against the government so that Lula does not carry out the agrarian reform that he promised in the campaign," he said.

On July 6, the MST said it would hold a large gathering July 13-14 in the Pontal de Paranapanema region, west of Sao Paulo, calling for support for agrarian reform. The theme of the gathering will be Regional Development and Agrarian Reform, and the organizers say they expect Rosseto and Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) president Jose Genoino to appear.

MST leaders said that the gathering would try to increase support among government authorities for improving the conditions of the camps in the area. Meanwhile, both landowners and the MST have met with Supremo Tribunal Federal (STF) president Mauricio Correa. The landowners have asked the court to apply the law against invasions of private property and to speed up restitution for lands occupied by campesinos. MST leaders asked that the court increase expropriations of idle lands.

Conviction in 1985 killing

In related news, on May 23 a court in Belem, the capital of Para state, convicted landowners Vantuir de Paula and Adilson Laranjeiras of ordering the murder of prominent rural union leader Joao Canuto de Oliveira, in the northeastern state of Para. The two men were each sentenced to 19 years in prison, but remain free pending appeal. Canuto de Oliveira, president of the Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Rurais, was shot dead in December 1985 in Rio Maria, Para state. He had received many death threats as a result of his work for agrarian reform and land rights.

The Rio Maria committee, headed by Canuto's daughter, said the investigation took eight years. The group said the judicial process only began after the Organization of American States (OAS) threatened to take action against the state governor because of the delay. The human rights group Amnesty International (AI) monitored the trial.

"The slowness of the judicial process and the failure to punish those responsible for these murders have clearly contributed to the continued pattern of violence," an AI statement said. The CPT says that more than 700 rural workers have been killed during the past 30 years in land conflicts in Para state. The death toll this year is already 13.

Human rights advocates celebrated the conviction, saying victims of land disputes in Brazil rarely find justice. Last year a senior police officer was sentenced to 228 years in prison for his role in the

1996 killing of 19 campesinos in Eldorado dos Carajas in Para state that also injured 69 injured (see NotiSur, 1996-04-26, 2002-05-24).

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