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Paraguayan Campesinos Stage Land Takeovers

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Thousands of landless campesinos in several Paraguayan departments staged mass occupations of thousands of hectares of unoccupied land in August and September, while others staged highway blockades.

Government efforts to remove the squatters led to a number of incidents of violence and caused the business sectors of Paraguayan society to call on President Nicanor Duarte Frutos "to protect private property rights."

The land occupations have brought the issue of agrarian reform to the fore of the Paraguayan political scene and may undermine Duarte's political credibility. "Sin tierras" take over 5,300 hectares, block highways. Landless campesinos, or "sin tierras," took over 23 haciendas in six departments, gaining temporary control of as many as 5,300 ha of land. Campesino groups declared the occupations to be indefinite, to last until they reached an agreement with the government.

A number of violent incidents have been reported during the land takeovers and police removals. Campesinos armed with sticks, machetes, and sickles faced off against police-force riot squads while landowners threatened to form paramilitary defense forces to protect their haciendas. Police reports said riot-squad officers were injured in clashes between campesinos and officials. Tallies of campesino injuries were not immediately available.

Various agreements between the government and the landless groups came together and fell apart as the days of August and September progressed. As talks to end a highway blockade stuttered along, the government called campesino demands "impossible."

One highway blockade in the northeastern part of the country was undone by force on Aug. 12, according to Interior Minister Orlando Fiorotto. Thousands of laborers had blockaded Route 3 in Santa Rosa de Aguaray some 300 km north of Asuncion in the department of San Pedro.

Groups there were calling for a tolerable electricity rate, agrarian reform, and measures to stop the increasing presence of Brazilian immigrants who are cultivating soy on large extensions of land. Campesinos have complained about the Brazilian immigrants' soy fields, saying they cause environmental damage and push Paraguayans off arable lands.

The Dirección General de Encuestas, Estadísticas y Censos (DGEEC) reports that San Pedro is the poorest department in the country, with 55.4% of its inhabitants unable to satisfy at least one of their basic needs. Like the Paraguayan groups seeking land, the Brazilian landless movement, Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), has also occupied nonproductive Brazilian lands in an effort to push forward agrarian reform in that country (see, NotiSur, 2003-04-04, 2003-07-11).
About 5,000 Paraguayan campesinos blocked a main transit route between the departments of Caaguazu and Alto Parana, one of the country's areas with the most economic movement, in mid-September. Protestors led by the Federacion Nacional Campesina (FNC) stood off against police armed with water cannons as they demanded President Duarte finalize purchases of lands for 5,000 working families.

The demands for "integral" land reform met with government responses that the demands were impossible to fulfill. The government offered some 6,000 ha to the protesters, a smaller tract than the campesinos had called for. Another group leading the occupations and blockades was the Frente Nacional de Lucha por la Soberania y la Vida.

On Sept. 29, Hugo Richer of the Frente said that campesinos would not abandon any of the occupied lands until the government fulfilled its promises. Campesino organizations also rejected a government offer to buy some 10,000 ha of land with US$10 million that would be obtained through the Instituto de Desarrollo Rural y de la Tierra along with a donation from Taiwan, one of Paraguay's top trade partners.

San Pedro groups had called for the delivery of 100,000 ha, a change from an export-oriented agricultural model, and the end of land sales to immigrants, among other demands. Accusations that the landless groups were receiving assistance from the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) emerged from government sources as blockades and occupations continued.

Deputy Interior Minister Eustaquio Colman said the organized campesino groups had a strong influence from the FARC, though he declined to give greater details. The head of the Fourth Police Zone, Commissioner Perfecto Figueredo, said the campesinos in Alto Parana "might be receiving foreign economic support." Yet the Paraguayan authorities have yet to offer concrete proof of supposed FARC help to the "sin tierras." Frente leader Fermin Bobadilla responded, saying that, "within our organizations, we have a wide diversity ideologically, but that we might be trained by foreigners is completely false."

**Intractable resistance to land reform**

Ever since the large-scale sale of public lands in the 1950s, land tenancy has been one of the principal social problems in Paraguay, a country where almost half the population lives in the rural sector. Large tracts of land were auctioned off in an irregular manner to families with powerful political connections, while small producers found themselves obligated to divide their land parcels among their descendants.

A 1991 agricultural census showed that 351 landowners controlled some 40% of country's arable land. Some nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) say about 98% of the country's land is in the hands of 2% of the population (see NotiSur, 1999-07-02), while others say 80% of properties are concentrated in the hands of 1% of the population. Efforts at land reform under previous administrations have generally fallen apart, as powerful property owners and radical land-reform movements put presidents like Juan Carlos Wasmosy (1993-1998) in political check.
On taking office in August of last year, Duarte promised to back small agricultural producers, but he pointed out that he would not tolerate invasions of private lands by the landless (see NotiSur, 2004-02-06). His popularity has seen a mild decline in his first year in office, and a failure to resolve the landless crisis could further weaken his political strength.

Officials want border security zone, soy chain Duarte's governing Partido Colorado (Asociacion Nacional Republicana, ANR) is pushing forward legislation in the Congress to establish a 50-km "security zone" around the nation's borders to protect national sovereignty. The legislation would prohibit the sale or transfer of real estate to foreign citizens and businesses within the strip of borderlands. The party also sought an inventory of the current state of real-estate ownership in the areas where Paraguay borders Argentina, Bolivia, and Brazil.

Lawmakers who announced the legislative push said that Argentina and Brazil have laws that prohibit the purchase of lands along their borders with Paraguay and that this law would reciprocate. Colorado authorities also pointed to the Estatuo Agrario of 1940 that forbade foreigners from purchasing lands within 20 leagues, or 100 km, of the borders, a law that was repealed in 1963. The government, through the Comision de Crisis Agraria, presented a plan on Sept. 23 to incorporate into a land-reform plan at least 30,000 ha of agricultural lands currently under campesino control.

The lands would be part of the "chain of soy production," said Agricultural Minister Antonio Ibanez, to alleviate the unfolding occupation crisis. He said agroexporters and soy producers viewed the proposal favorably.

Cesar Jure Yunis, president of the Camara de Exportadores Cereales (Capeco), said his group would assume "the commitment to accompany this proposal. It will probably alleviate the conflicts and carry us toward an agreement that may bring peace." The incorporation process would consist of helping campesinos through the formation of cooperatives and the use of silos, which are found in the area of the current occupations. Jure says the soy chain is made up of 27,000 producers on plots smaller than 20 ha.

Vice President Luis Castiglioni, head of the Agrarian Crisis Commission, says the initial goal of the program would be to incorporate at least 30,000 campesinos. Ibanez said campesinos who entered the program would get commitments of financing and, with the silos, they would be able to market their production.

Regionally, soy has been a booming agricultural product, as demand for the bean and its derivatives grows, particularly from China. It has fueled a rural economic revival in Argentina (see NotiSur, 2004-02-27), but environmentalists have warned that soy monoculture could be environmentally and economically destructive and genetically modified soybeans could cause genetic contamination (see NotiSur, 2003-10-03).

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