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Protests, Strikes, and Kidnappings in Paraguay

by LADB Staff

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In Paraguay, 2004 ended in bloody protests by landless groups, with little hope emerging for resolving campesino organization's complaints against the government. Landless campesinos, or "sintierras," have been battling with government forces and private landowners' security forces increasingly since last year (see NotiSur, 2004-10-01). Complaints about human rights abuses in the countryside and in urban protests have increased. A perceived national state of lawlessness, embodied by the kidnapping of the daughter of former President Raul Cubas Grau (1998-1999), has also damaged efforts of President Nicanor Duarte's administration to present itself as a reform government.

Duarte weathered a national strike that failed to mobilize large swathes of the population, at least according to press reports, although it did challenge the reputation of the Duarte presidency. Landless clashes result in bloodshed Clashes between landless campesinos and Paraguayan security forces left a police officer dead and 20 other people injured in a resurgence of violence that has rattled Paraguay's government. Land distribution has become a life-and-death issue in Paraguay, where a large part of the population of 6.2 million survives through subsistence farming.

Campesino groups say the government is not doing enough to redistribute land to the poor. The police officer was shot Nov. 30 when police and military troops evicted hundreds of squatters from a soybean field in Itapua Poty, 400 km southeast of Asuncion, authorities said. A second clash erupted that night in Guyaybi, about 255 km north of the Paraguayan capital, and left 20 campesinos and officers injured.

Authorities reported 312 arrests during the second clash. The outbreak of protests posed a challenge to the government of President Duarte, who began his presidency in August 2003 pledging an economic reversal after years of deep recession. Interviewed on national television on December 1, Duarte accused the head of a national campesinos union of inciting followers to trespass on private land.

Farmers groups demand that more than 150,000 hectares be distributed among 300,000 poor families. The government says it will turn over 20,000 ha to landless groups but lacks funding to buy up more private lands for distribution. Previously, campesino groups had complained of human rights violations in the Nov. 15 eviction of squatters from lands belonging to the company Kaguare'i de Fassardi, saying soldiers mistreated women and children and robbed evictees of money and goods. Soldiers were following a court order to arrest nine people accused of "invasion of private property and obstruction of agriculture."

People living at Kaguare'i said the soldiers arrested people who were not even on the court order. Workers had moved onto the finca weeks before to impede the fumigation of large tracts of soy crops with agro-toxins. Protests against fumigation have resulted in fatalities before (see NotiSur,
2004-02-06). Forces from the military were guarding large soy and cornfields for the Kaguare’i company with the mission of evicting the workers who opposed the fumigations.

In Paraguay, an estimated 77% of the land is held by 1% of the population. Civic strike closes highways, but turnout low A series of strikes also closed down highways and attempted to paralyze the nation in an eight-day National Civil Strike that ended Nov. 24. The Frente Nacional de Lucha por la Vida y la Soberania coordinated the action, where locals blockaded roads in Caaguazu and campesinos took their protests to the capital in Asuncion. Marches were smaller than had been predicted, and strike leaders complained that the military was blocking busloads of protestors on various roads.

Organizers of the protest said 4,000 people had mobilized around the country to protest against repression in the countryside and lack of land reform, while Vice President Luis Castiglioni claimed the number was less than 1,700. "It seems inexplicable to me that they are reverting to forceful measures," said Castiglioni on a local radio broadcast. "We have a plan that's moving forward. Lands are being bought, we're willing to work [with the campesino groups]." The groups moved their protests to the capital after there were attacks on protestors in the department of San Pedro, about 350 km from Asuncion.

"The Frente has achieved its objective," announced Luis Aguayo, of the Mesa Coordinadora Nacional de Organizaciones Campesinas (MCNOC), after negotiating an end to the strike with Castiglioni. He said that there was a promise to remove military forces from the countryside starting on Dec. 15 and that there was an agreement to end repression and free imprisoned campesinos. Border protests also shut down the main connection between Brazil and Paraguay in mid-November, as about 5,000 residents of Ciudad del Este in Paraguay closed the international bridge to protest restrictions on commerce with their neighbor country.

A week before the shutdown, the Brazilian federal government put a plan in place to create strict controls on all vehicles and people passing through the border post, some 60 km from Foz de Iguazu in Brazil. Civil authorities and religious and union leaders joined the blockade to show that Foz de Iguazu also depended on border trade. They were also protesting the daily influx of tons of Brazilian fruits, vegetables, and other products that enter without any kind of control.

Gustavo Pedrozo, the governor of Alta Parana, whose capital is Ciudad del Este, said the commercial center was "a victim of a lack of seriousness in complying with the MERCOSUR treaty." Ex-president's daughter kidnapped, still missing Cecilia Cubas, 31-year-old daughter of ex-President Raul Cubas Grau (1998-1999), was taken on the night of Sept. 23 by armed assailants who were in two vehicles, and she remains missing. Her kidnapping terrified the political class and gave the Duarte administration a black eye. The kidnapping, followed by the kidnapping and murder of a 10-year-old boy, left the populace shaken and angry and dominated headlines in Paraguay.

President Duarte dismissed his interior minister after the 10-year-old boy was found dead and his body mutilated. Duarte, who was traveling in Germany as part of a three-nation European tour, dismissed Interior Minister Orlando Fiorotto and national police chief Humberto Nunez. The boy,
Armin Anibal Riquelme Seif, was found Oct. 13, two days after his abduction near his school in Asuncion. The boy was the son of tobacco business owner Pedro Luis Riquelme.

The boy's sister was kidnapped in 2002 and released after the family paid her abductors. The boy's mother, Yamili, told local reporters that the family was unable to meet an unspecified ransom demand. "We offered them our house and our truck," she said. Local reports quoted authorities as saying the boy's face had been disfigured, but details about his death were unclear and police had no immediate comment. Cecilia Cubas was taken from her car near her home Sept. 21 by heavily armed assailants in a commando-style operation.

Raul Cubas was Paraguay's president from August 1998 until March 1999, when the assassination of his vice president, Luis Maria Argana, triggered rioting and political turmoil that forced him to resign (see NotiSur, 1999-03-26). Paraguayans worried that a crime wave sweeping much of Latin America may now be reaching the landlocked country of 6 million people. The kidnappings dominated headlines and provoked a climate of insecurity in Paraguay.

"There is a sense that robberies, assaults, and kidnappings are quickly becoming everyday occurrences," said Antonio Lopez, a 30-year-old pharmaceutical salesman. Paraguay is battling a protracted recession brought on in part by earlier financial troubles in neighboring Argentina. And events in Paraguay mirror similar kidnapping waves experienced by Mexico and Argentina when they suffered economic meltdowns in the mid-1990s and 2002, respectively.

At the end of January, prosecutors were able to produce evidence of phone cards and telephone equipment that they said linked seven members of the leftist party Patria Libre with Cecilia Cubas' kidnapping, but they did not manage to produce the victim. Patria Libre leaders denied any relationship with the crime. Two party leaders, tried in 2002 in Paraguay for the kidnapping of the wife of a businessman, are in exile in Brazil.

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