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Land-reforms to Break Up Latifundios

by LADB Staff
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Conflict over President Hugo Chavez's land-reform program has grown, with the Instituto Nacional de Tierras (INTI) seeking to break up large and idle estates. The drive is an effort to revitalize the Venezuelan rural and agricultural sector and decrease the concentration of lands in the hands of a small number of the wealthy, but critics and ranchers who stand to lose property say the effort will cause reduced production.

"War" on large estates

In January, INTI kicked its efforts to break up large estates into high gear, stating it would analyze the nation's lands in response to Chavez's presidential decree on land tenancy and his declared "war against the latifundio," or large estate. An INTI special commission gave a set of recommendations to the president to build a "national plan" for land reform, in contrast to the differing programs instituted by different governors allied with Chavez.

A 1998 census found that 60% of Venezuela's farmland was owned by less than 1% of the population. The survey said 90% of farmland given to the poor under a 1960 agrarian reform had since returned to the hands of large landholders. One key to the success of the current reform program, say many analysts, will be the implementation of a comprehensive technical-assistance program for small farmers moving onto new fields.

Under a 2001 land-reform law advocated by President Chavez, the government can expropriate farmlands if they are declared idle or if rightful ownership is not proved as far back as 1830.

Eliecer Otiaza, INTI president, said the institute had identified "some 500 idle terrains and 56 latifundios within the country," following a process of "national registry" that sought to identify unproductive lands and determine whether they were public or private. Critics say the move by Chavez is a threat to private property in Venezuela, and they accuse him of being a "Castro communist," but Chavez says most farming lands were acquired through illegal dealings before he became president in 1999.

Venezuela's government announced this month that it will expropriate a British-owned meat producer's land and a local animal reserve, among other properties, saying the private owners did not have legitimate claims. INTI said that it would take over 96,570 hectares of land and give it to the poor. The government will take over all of El Charcote Ranch, a cattle ranch that belongs to an affiliate of Britain's Vestey Group, and the animal reserve Pinero Ranch, the land agency said. It also will take over a third privately owned ranch, El Coco, and most of a fourth property, Borges Ranch. It was not immediately clear when the government would move to take possession of the lands.
The land agency said it would take El Charcote's 12,950 ha in Cojedes state east of Caracas because owners could prove ownership going back only to 1840, not to the required year of 1830. El Charcote's owner, meat producer Agropecuaria Flora C.A., told the media several weeks ago that it can prove ownership back to 1830 and that its land is not idle but has simply been invaded by squatters. The government decided that the animal refuge Pinero Ranch, also in Cojedes state, doesn't have legitimate documents proving ownership of its 80,100 ha.

**Land conflicts are source of vigilante killings**

Squatters and ranchers have gone into pitched conflict with the acceleration of reform measures. Hundreds of squatters have moved onto the vast cattle ranch in El Charcote and planted crops in hopes the land will one day be declared their own, putting them sharply at odds with the British-owned company that claims rightful ownership. Most of the estimated 600 squatters farming plots on El Charcote arrived in the four years since President Chavez signed the law clearing the way for agrarian reform.

"We don't know what will happen when they come," Miguel Espana, a 54-year-old ranch manager, said with a nervous laugh. "We try our best to coexist with the squatters while authorities decide what they are going to do with the ranch." But coexistence has been marked by tension. The squatters "cut barbed-wire fences, burn the grasses cattle feed on...and occasionally steal them," said Espana, who has worked at the ranch for 28 years. He said the ranch, 200 km southwest of Caracas, boasted 11,000 cattle four years ago. Now there are fewer than 5,000, and the work force has been reduced from about 5,000 to 30. "Uncertainty reigns here," Espana said. "I know one thing for sure: this ranch will never be what it once was."

Zinc-roofed shacks made of dried mud, timber, and bamboo stalks now overlook meadows where cattle graze. Poor farmers have put up their own barbed wire to keep herds from trampling corn, eggplant, plantains, squash, and melon. Officials say land reform should not immediately involve "expropriation," but rather dialogue with landowners and careful study. They also say that the poor have been waiting long enough and that change should help prevent violence.

"We have to recognize that we have not given a fast and timely answer to these poor farmers," said Luis Silva, regional director of Venezuela's Agriculture and Land Ministry. "We have a social debt with them." Yet human rights groups have expressed concerns about the increase of vigilante killings in the countryside, many of which are related to land conflicts. Hermes Escalona was the 75th campesino killed in Venezuela since Chavez enacted his land-reform program two years ago. Hermes and five other men, all awarded someone else's land as part of the US$40 million redistribution program, were shot Nov. 4 in the town of Bruzual. Thirty of the owner's employees tried to evict people they considered squatters, according to the government account.

"It was lead versus machete; they were going to win," said Aldrin Escalona, Hermes' 27-year-old brother. "They started shooting us like animals."
Claudio Garcia, former official with the Direcccion de Inteligencia Militar (DIM), says, "There are now many agricultural producers who are preparing to defend their properties with everything in their reach, including with the formation of paramilitary groups."

**Cattle federation says production will go down**

The president of cattle producers group Federacion Nacional de Ganaderos, Jose Luis Betancourt, said that the government's land reform would reduce national production. He said the expropriations at the four ranches were a violation of due process since there had as yet been no firm decision from the Tribunal Supremo de Justicia (TSJ). Betancourt said that no property owner feels their land rights are safe and that the ability to get financing and new investment is threatened. He said producers are restricted when going to banks since they cannot offer guarantees for the loans that they use to cover the cost of planting. He says national cattle production has declined 10% in recent years as a result of national policies.

But the government says it is seeking to renovate the agricultural sector, which has been in decline since Venezuela became an oil-producing state in the 1970s. The country currently imports more agricultural products than it exports, something Chavez says should be unnecessary with all the rich land in the country. About 90% of Venezuela's 25 million people live in urban areas, a demographic shift toward urban centers that occurred largely because of expansion in the petroleum sector.

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