6-6-2005

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Category/Department: Brazil
Published: 2005-06-06

The Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST), or landless rural workers movement, flexed its political muscle in Brasilia with a 200 km National March for Agrarian Reform in May. MST activists protested the slow pace of land distribution to landless workers, a key promise in the presidential campaign of President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva. Government officials announced that they had come to an agreement with MST leaders at the end of the protest march that lasted more than two weeks.

Over 12,000 march on capital During the course of 17 days, an estimated 12,000 to 15,000 MST marchers traveled 200 km on foot to Brasilia from Goiania in the neighboring state of Goias. Brasilia's security chief Gen. Athos Costa said nearly all of the city's police were deployed to watch over the marchers. MST leaders met with President Lula and presented him with a list of 16 demands including economic reform, increased public spending, and meeting the government's pledge on housing.

Leaders of the movement say they still back the president, but analysts say they could withdraw their support for the president's re-election bid if he fails to spend more on resettling landless families. "We have no doubt that Lula is our friend. We don't want to break with him. We have to change his economic policies," march coordinator Marina dos Santos told Reuters. Brazil has one of the world's more extreme concentrations of land ownership, with nearly half of all farmland owned by just 1% of the population.

The struggle for control of Brazilian lands dates back to the years when the country was still a Portuguese colony. King Joao VI divided up the coast into large sections of land that he distributed among his favorites, who acquired the right to occupy these lands and pass them down to their descendants, but not to sell them. In return, they had the obligation to build villages and plantations, and even establish judicial systems. This gave rise to the system of latifundia: large estates with a single owner. Concentration of land ownership became increasingly marked over time, partly because of the growth in population.

MST protests ruling party's fiscal conservatism

The MST has been a core constituency that has expressed its dissatisfaction at the moderation of Lula's governing Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT). Radicals have criticized Lula's government for not following through with campaign promises and focusing too much on international economic integration. Marchers also voiced opposition to "US meddling" in Brazilian affairs and to the economic policies adopted by the Lula government, which "contribute to creating greater wealth for a privileged minority," said dos Santos.
At the US Embassy protesters shouted out slogans condemning "US terrorism," and one group dumped and burned garbage in front of the embassy as a way of symbolically giving back "the garbage produced by the United States." Ministry of Agriculture workers showed their solidarity with marchers as they passed by, unfurling an MST banner from one of the windows, while shredded bits of paper rained down from another.

Riots marred demonstrations in the capital at the end of the national march, however, when riot police clashed with protesters near Congress, leaving several dozen wounded.

Landowners have expressed anger at land occupations by MST groups, and frequent evictions by police have led to repeated scuffles, although property owners regularly express the belief that the police are not doing enough to clamp down on squatters. About 1,000 rural activists have been murdered in recent years, with many of them coming from the 20-year-old MST. The recent murder of a US-born nun in the Amazon briefly drew international attention to the violence against rural activists (NotiSur, Feb. 25, 2005).

Agreement to settle 400,000 families announced

At the end of the march, the government said it had reached an agreement on agrarian reform with the nation's leading activist land group. Officials in Brazil's Agrarian Development Ministry said they reached a deal with the MST, agreeing to Resettle some 400,000 families by the end of 2006, according to May 19 reports.

"We achieved important advances in this accord with the government," MST leader Jaime Amorim said, calling the meeting a "success." The deal came one day after MST protesters and riot police clashed in the capital, Brasilia. President Lula campaigned in 2002 on promises of such a settlement but has so far fallen well short of the goal.

A total of 60,000 families were supposed to be settled on their own land during Lula's first year in office, but only 36,800 actually were. And, though the goal for 2004 was to provide land to 115,000 families, barely 80,000 lots were actually distributed, according to MST statements. Additionally, the government has fallen far short of providing the resources it was to devote to agrarian-reform efforts, releasing only one-third the amounts pledged for both 2004 and 2005. In April, Agrarian Development Minister Miguel Rossetto publicly protested the budget cuts made in this sector. Before meeting with Lula, MST representatives held talks with Senate leader Renan Calheiros and Chamber of Deputies leader Severino Cavalcanti. Calheiros told the delegation that he supported the idea of dialogue, while Cavalcanti expressed anger at the unequal distribution of land in Brazil. "I cannot accept a country where a small few have kilometers and kilometers of land while others have none at all," he said. For dos Santos, the National March for Agrarian Reform has already yielded positive results. "We are here to revive the debate on agrarian reform and to call on the government to go back to
its agrarian policies, which have been abandoned." The country has more than enough resources to live up to the promises the government has made, and "all that is needed are the right policies," she said.

MST figures indicate there are 500,000 families in Brazil who have been settled on plots of land, while another 200,000 are living in camps under highly precarious conditions, waiting to be provided with land of their own to farm. Nevertheless, distributing land is not enough, stressed dos Santos. "The government also needs to provide infrastructure, to ensure sustainability for the families who are settled," she said.

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