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Land Reform Measures Accelerate

by LADB Staff

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The Venezuelan government has accelerated the pace of its "war against the latifundio," or large estate, as President Hugo Chavez has called his land-reform push. The government has delivered land titles to campesinos and indigenous groups and set an urban land-reform project into motion, while business groups and large landholders have complained of unjust treatment as authorities have broken up large estates and seized "unproductive" factories.

Earlier this year, the Instituto Nacional de Tierras (INTI) announced that it had identified 500 idle territories and over 50 latifundios within the country suitable for land reform (see NotiSur, 2005-03-18). One of the most prominent has been the 13,000-hectare El Charcote ranch 200 km southwest of Caracas owned by the British Vestey Group.

Ranching groups have complained that the threat of expropriation is causing agricultural productivity to decline while landless and campesino groups are pushing ever harder for access to rural lands.

March calls for increases in land redistribution

Thousands of poor farmers marched through Venezuela's capital Caracas Oct. 8 calling on the government to broaden its initiative to expropriate what they called "idle" land a program that has raised the ire of cattle ranchers across the country.

Chanting "The Land Belongs To All!" and waving Venezuelan flags, roughly 4,000 supporters of President Chavez demanded that the land be handed over to those willing to work it. "In this country there's too much land in the hands of too few," said Juan Santos. "Giving the poor people a parcel of land shouldn't cause so much conflict, it's an act of justice." Under the program, authorities have begun turning some large ranches over to state-funded cooperatives. Dozens of ranches or vast estates classified by government officials as unproductive or those lacking valid property titles have been expropriated.

A 2001 law allows the state to seize lands deemed idle. Chavez and his ministers have frequently made statements that they are not seeking to abolish private property, as their critics frequently claim. "Private property is not sacred," and the right to it is not absolute, said Chavez on his weekly television broadcast Sept. 25. "I, too, support private property. "All property should be regulated by the law, limited by the law." Chavez was commenting on the Army's occupation of four haciendas, including the 8,500-ha ranch La Marquesena in the eastern state of Barinas. "The time has come to recover Venezuelan land to put it to producing what our people need for their sustenance."

The Federacion Nacional de Ganaderos (Fedenaga), the national cattle raisers organization, claims officials have made numerous errors in classifying lands and have not given ranchers opportunities...
to prove ownership in courts before soldiers seize control of their lands. At the La Marquesena ranch, the government plans to leave owner Carlos Azpurua 1,500 ha to continue food production, while another 2,700 ha would be given to campesinos.

The remaining lands would host a state-owned genetics company for improving cattle and seed production. Under Venezuela's Constitution and national laws, which prohibit the confiscation of property, expropriations carried out for the public good must be accompanied by timely indemnification, if property ownership has been legally established.

In an interview before he was elected president in 1998, Chavez told historian Agustin Blanco that part of the La Marquesena land had belonged to his great-grandfather Pedro Perez, a veteran of the civil wars fought a century ago, who later lost his property.

In his September show, Chavez said that no one could prove without a doubt their legal claim to the land in question. "There has been speculation that I want to recover it for my family. That's not true. It will be for the people," he said. Azpurua says he holds title deeds to the land, which are the last in an unbroken chain of documents that can be traced back to the 17th century. The issue of legal, historic ownership is a controversial part of the "war against the latifundio."

Historians say that during the civil wars that raged during the 19th century in Venezuela, many landholders expanded their property by fencing in public and communal land. Until now, landowners had to show that there was an unbroken chain of titles dating back to 1848, when a law on uncultivated common land and communal land was passed, to prove their property ownership, according to the INTI. But the president has moved the limit back to 1821, when Venezuela did not yet exist as an independent republic but was part of Gran Colombia.

**Major food-processing plant ordered seized**

The government has also recently seized food-processing plants that allegedly were not being adequately used and has moved to expropriate them.

Empresas Polar SA, Venezuela's largest food processor, said it would contest the order of a state governor to seize one of its plants. Empresas Polar president Lorenzo Mendoza said at a news conference that the company wants the courts to overturn the ruling by Barinas State Gov. Hugo de Los Reyes Chavez, father of President Chavez. "We consider this decree unjust and unconstitutional," Mendoza said. "This is a huge attack on our rights."

Gov. Chavez ordered the seizure of the plant on Sept. 26, the latest in a series of government seizures. Mendoza said the company is waiting to receive a copy of the governor's decree. "Once we have it, we will do the respective analysis of it to proceed to the competent bodies of Venezuelan justice," he said. The federal government last week said it had reached an agreement to allow Polar to reopen the plant.

Mendoza said the Caracas-based company, which also has interests in oil and petrochemicals, plans to keep investing in Venezuela. "We have to continue meeting the needs of the market," Mendoza
said. The governor of Monagas state seized an idle H.J. Heinz ketchup plant earlier in September. Heinz said it was in the process of selling the plant and called for the government to give it back. Heinz was offered US$100,000 in compensation, although the company had called for US$500,000.

**Government delivers land titles to indigenous peoples**

Part of the land-reform package has been directed at the country's 300,000 indigenous people who face severe poverty. During an Oct. 12 ceremony, Chavez handed over 15 property titles for more than 667,000 ha to the Cuiba, Yuaruro, Warao, and Karina tribes. The documents recognized collective ownership of ancestral lands by communities with some 3,000 people.

"Previously, the indigenous people of Venezuela were removed from our lands. This is historic. It is a joyful day," said Librado Moraleda, a 52-year-old Warao from a remote village in the Orinoco River Delta. Moraleda received a land title and government pledges of US$27,000 to build homes and plant cassava and plantains. But some indigenous leaders said they need more help beyond land titles.

"We want the government to help us with hunger, with credit," said Yuaruro Indian Pedro Mendez. He said his community had asked for an electrical generator and loans to help plant more crops. In another ceremony on Aug. 9, Chavez gave six indigenous groups title to their ancestral lands, saying it reversed centuries of injustice.

Chavez said he hoped the government would be able to turn over titles to 15 other indigenous communities by the end of the year. "What we're recognizing is the original ownership of these lands," Chavez said. "Now no one will be able to come and trample on you in the future." But Chavez also said the process of granting legal ownership must respect Venezuela's "territorial unity," and he urged other indigenous groups not to ask for "infinite expanses of territory." "Don't ask me to give you the state's rights to exploit mines, to exploit oil," Chavez said. "Before all else comes national unity." The documents recognize land ownership by six indigenous communities with some 4,000 people and territory covering 127,000 ha in the eastern states of Anzoategui and Monagas.

One woman from the Kari'na community thanked Chavez, saying, "He is the first president who has kept his word to a people who have been stripped of their lands." The land-reform process has also come to the cities, where Chavez rallies supporters and has distributed over 10,000 titles to Comites de Tierras Urbanas (CTU). The 2002 decree that set up the CTUs specified that Venezuelans who live in self-built homes on occupied land, which is the case for nearly all of Venezuela's poor, can appeal to the government for title to the land.

It is estimated that up to 60% of Venezuela's population of 26 million live in such barrios. The main mechanism for acquiring title to the land, which some have occupied for decades, are the land committees, where 100 to 200 families who live in a contiguous area elect a few individuals to represent their community. The committees then register with the Oficina Tecnica Nacional para la Regularizacion de la Tenencia de la Tierra Urbana. The technical office then provides the
committees with training and help to measure out the families' plots of land and to initiate the process of acquiring title to the land.

In some cases, land committees have requested collective land titles. Opposition, businesses allege inappropriate expropriations Venezuela's highest court must decide if takeovers of privately owned farms under the government land-reform plan are legal, representatives of the agriculture industry said Sept. 13.

Gustavo Moreno, president of the Confederacion Nacional de Asociaciones de Productores Agropecuarios (Fedeagro), said farm and ranch owners would challenge the takeovers in Venezuelan courts. "We will use our rights at the Supreme Court" if efforts to negotiate an end to the takeovers with government officials fail, he said. Leading efforts to protect business owners has been the Federacion de Camaras de Venezuela (Fedecameras).

Leaders requested a meeting with Chavez to discuss concerns about expropriations and land reform in late September after the seizure of the Polar plant. "We want to speak with you, Mr. President," said Jose Luis Betancourt, president of the Fedecameras. "Businesspeople are indispensable for fighting poverty and underdevelopment, that's what we are here for." Betancourt said the business chamber would cooperate with the government's land-reform initiative, but demanded that rights to private property be respected in the process.

London-educated Venezuelan economist Alexander Guerrero criticized the land-reform practice as "a strategy to debilitate the strength of economic capital, to debilitate its political expression through laws and decrees of this type....Here the largest latifundista, the primary landholder, is the [Venezuelan] state, the majority of [its holdings] unproductive."

-- End --