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President Morales Prepares Land-reform

by LADB Staff

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The Bolivian government began a sweeping land-reform program in June after negotiations with large-scale landholders broke down in late May. President Evo Morales seeks to conduct a large-scale "agrarian revolution" to distribute farmlands to poor campesinos and to break up latifundios (huge estates), many of which were amassed during past dictatorships. The land-reform program bears similarities to that Venezuela's President Hugo Chavez (see NotiSur, 2005-03-18, 2005-10-28), but also has roots in more than 50 years of different Bolivian administrations' mostly failed efforts to make land distribution more equitable.

On June 3, Morales launched the program by handing over roughly 26,000 sq km of state-owned property to indigenous communities. More land, including unused private property, is slated to be turned over as part of Morales' agrarian revolution. "Some business owners are trying to subdue us, but I tell myself they, their grandparents have subjugated our lands for more than 500 years and these lands have to return to the hand of the absolute owners of this noble land, who are Quechuas, Aymaras, Mojenos, Chipayas, Chiquitanos," said Morales at the June 3 handover ceremony in Santa Cruz. The land-reform project followed Morales' May 1 announcement that Bolivia would be nationalizing the country's massive natural-gas reserves (see NotiSur, 2006-05-12). Foreign-owned energy companies have six months to negotiate new contracts or leave the country.

Thousands of Indians gathered in the eastern city of Santa Cruz to receive land titles, chanting "Evo!" and waving Bolivian and rainbow whipala flags, which represent 500 years of Indian struggle. "We want to change Bolivia together," Morales told the crowd. "Getting back the land means we're getting back all the natural resources, we're nationalizing all the natural resources." "The greatest need right now is the recovery of our territory," Wilson Chacaray, a Guarani Indian leader, told the crowd. "The landowners, the foreign companies, the political parties that have always dominated this country took our land from us and that's why we live in misery."

Talks with landholders suspended

The ceremony came after talks broke down between Morales and agribusiness leaders on the land reforms that will involve handing out about 200,000 sq km of government land an area twice the size of Portugal during the next five years. The land currently targeted for redistribution was set aside for that purpose before Morales took office in January. None of it has been confiscated from large landholders. But the government says it will eventually seize and redistribute privately owned land that is unproductive, was obtained illegally, or is being used for speculation. Just under 90% of Bolivia's productive terrain is worked by only 50,000 families, leaving millions of Bolivians with little or no land, according to the government.

Large-scale farmers say they fear mass deforestation. The government's promise to redistribute some private holdings has generated further unease among landholders. One farmers' group

has said it would form "self-defense" groups to prevent land seizures. The government plan is heightening long-standing tensions between the prosperous residents of Bolivia's agricultural lowlands and the poorer, mostly Indian people of the western high plains. Much of the terrain targeted for reform is state land in the fertile eastern lowlands.

Landowners plan self-defense committees to fight seizures

On May 16, the government released details of the plans to distribute unused land to the country's poor campesinos. Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera said privately owned productive farmland would not be affected and called for a public dialogue. "With the farmers, with the indigenous, with all the social sectors involved in the issue of land, it is necessary to look together at points of conflict, to talk about them at the table, look at them from one side, look at them from the other, and, at the end of a month, two months, or three months, we will begin to make decisions again," said Garcia Linera. Yet dialogue was not sustainable, and landholders' groups walking out of the talks at the end of May.

The Confederacion Agropecuaria Nacional (Confeagro), a landowners' group, released a statement that they would create self-defense committees to face "the threats of subjugation" of their lands. The group said it would hold the government responsible for the "predictable confrontations between Bolivians" that could come about under "the climate of uncertainty and confrontation that the government authorities have created."

Agribusiness leaders said they had cut off dialogue with Morales because the government refused to make any concessions on its proposals. The Morales administration said the proposed self-defense groups would be illegal. On June 2, seven of the country's nine leading business federations issued a statement saying Bolivia's "prospects for a better future are being diluted by actions based on ideology, politics, and foreign influence." Morales' conservative opponents have criticized his close ties with the leftist governments of Cuba and Venezuela.

The government responded by calling the business leaders "traitors." Morales' decision to hand out the titles in Santa Cruz had strong political symbolism, since the department of Santa Cruz, which is generally more well-to-do and whiter than other parts of the country, is a primary site for strong conservative organizations. It also is a center for the autonomy movement that gained strength during the term of President Carlos Mesa (2003-2005), a movement rooted mainly in eastern departments and calling for greater political control and economic independence (see NotiSur, 2004-11-12).

Critics accuse those in the autonomy movement of being separatists or secessionists interested in keeping profits from the natural-gas industry in the hands of a small elite and the multinational corporations. Alejandro Almaraz, Bolivia's vice minister of land, praised the initial handovers, saying the government would ensure the sustainable management of the land and no forests or protected natural areas would be touched. "It's land that has no legal problems," Almaraz said. "And we believe that it's not right to try to block this measure, when it's going to help many poor people that have been waiting and need this land to improve their life."

Farmers have objected to the pace of the reforms. "They're going to carry out a political plan for something that first requires technical structuring, infrastructure, and training," said Mauricio Roca, vice president of the powerful Camara Agropecuaria del Oriente (CAO). Roca said the chamber does not oppose land reform, but prefers a more gradual redistribution program combined with agricultural training. Officials said Morales would also sign executive decrees speeding up the government land redistribution, which has dragged on for more than a decade as Bolivia's justice system slowly untangled title disputes.

Enough technical support?

A study by the UN Development Program (UNDP) found that, in this region, just 100 families own 25 million ha, while two million families of small farmers have barely 5 million ha. Sociologist Joaquin Saravia, a professor at the Universidad Mayor de San Andres, believes that land distribution on its own will not solve the problem of poverty. Instead, he proposes a development plan based on sound economic, environmental, political, and administrative criteria, linked to the creation of large producing regions. Determining the productive strengths of each region and joining them together to generate intensive agricultural production, with technological support and credits, could prevent a return to the history of the 1950s, when plots of land were distributed to families who ended up subdividing their property almost to extinction, Saravia said in an interview with Inter Press Service.

Enrique Ormachea, an agricultural analyst with the Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Laboral y Agrario (CEDLA), pointed out that "the limited state lands to be distributed are in the departments of Santa Cruz, Beni, and Pando, and the small farmers living in those departments will have priority." But, he asked, "what will happen to the small farmers in the [western] highlands, where most of the poverty is concentrated?"

The 1953 land distribution affected large estates in the altiplano (highlands) and valleys in the departments of La Paz, Oruro, Potosi, and Cochabamba, in the west, center, and southwest of the country. As a result, there is little land left to be distributed in that region. Ormachea is concerned about the future of small farmers from the altiplano, where land can no longer be found, who have no option but to migrate to the cities and hire themselves out as cheap, unskilled labor. So far, the government has not announced a plan to relocate families, or a settlement policy, in relation to the agrarian-reform measures.

Saravia agrees with Ormachea that "the small size of the plots of land are the cause of extreme poverty in several small-farmer sectors." He added, "That's why it's not good enough to give them small parcels of land; it would be better to form a large collective or communally owned farm in which technology can be used to boost productivity." Quiroga, in turn, emphasized the urgent need for a broad government program, to include technical assistance, productive infrastructure, provision of farm machinery through cooperatives, access to soft credit, and guaranteed markets for producers.

Nevertheless, Quiroga predicted there would be a land struggle among small farmers, indigenous people, and agribusiness. "Agriculture and livestock owners' associations, and one sector of small-

producers' associations, are being led by dishonest businessmen or pseudo-businessmen, who are bent on embezzling banking institutions by taking out 'linked' loans [given to bank shareholders] or simply not paying them back," Quiroga said.

The government has also said that large rural properties have been used as collateral against loans that were left unpaid, driving financial institutions into bankruptcy. Even now, the state is still trying to collect debts amounting to US\$70 million, contracted in the early 1990s by influential members of the business community.

The executive secretary of the Confederacion Sindical Unica de Trabajadores Campesinos de Bolivia (CSUTCB), Felipe Quispe, an indigenous leader from the western region and Morales opponent, was critical of the government's plan because, he said, it aims at reaching an accommodation with "owners of vast estates and landholders who have historically exploited rural workers." For the time being, Quispe has not called for seizures of private lands, in contrast to the small Movimiento Sin Tierra (MST), or landless movement, which is divided into a wing that supports the government and one that is in radical opposition.

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