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Bolivian President Evo Morales Begins Ambitious Land Reform Project

by LADB Staff
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At the beginning of 2007, Bolivian President Evo Morales launched his program to seize land deemed unproductive or fraudulently acquired from big owners and convert those lands into communally run farms for thousands of poor Bolivians. In August 2006, Morales handed out titles for farmland and tractors made in Venezuela and Iran to Bolivian campesinos to drum up support for his ambitious agrarian reform.

The new law regarding the Instituto Nacional de Reforma Agraria (INRA) then wound its way through Congress in November, with large protests in the capital pressuring lawmakers to pass the bill, which they did. Morales seeks to convert almost one-fifth of the country into communal farms. The effort to break up latifundios, or large estates, resembles similar programs underway in Venezuela (see NotiSur 2005-03-18 and 2005-10-28).

Pueblos Unidos first community in program

The hamlet of Pueblos Unidos became the first community founded on land redistributed by Morales in 2006, a crucial first step in his vision of lifting his fellow Bolivians out of South America's severest poverty. But the village and its mosquito-choked fields also reveal the immense challenges facing the farmers, from competing with the giant soybean plantations next door to coming up with gasoline for the tractors.

Still, the community founded in September 2006 is a dream come true for several hundred formerly landless campesinos a 16,000-hectare spread, part of which lies on land expropriated from a soybean farmer. "We're no longer talking about whether we can stay here, whether the legal papers might come through, whether it's time to move again," said Luis Velasquez, a leader in Bolivia's landless movement (Movimiento Sin Tierra) and Pueblo Unidos' unofficial mayor. "We're talking about something real." Morales has pledged to redistribute a staggering 124,000 sq km an area the size of Nebraska among Bolivia's long-oppressed indigenous majority during the next five years.

A key difficulty in implementing the INRA law will be untangling centuries of muddled real estate records, overcoming resistance from landowners vowing to defend their land with force if necessary, and coming up with seed money for the new farms. In Pueblos Unidos, the farmers have new tractors but no gasoline to power them. Morales' administration must untangle those records while building a government agency to monitor land use across a sparsely populated nation twice the size of France.

Ultimately, success will turn on how well his government can support the farmers settling the redistributed land. Morales came to Pueblos Unidos in October to donate the tractors, a gas-powered generator, and a pump for the well. But when the Associated Press visited in December, the tractors and the generator had no fuel and sat idle in a clearing of dried mud at the village.
center. Need for a "national effort" to make lands viable "We have to make this a national effort," said Miguel Urioste, director of Fundacion Tierra, a La Paz-based nonprofit group monitoring agrarian reform in Bolivia. "We have to work together to provide technical support, training, schools, safe drinking water. Just handing out tractors won't get it done."

Without such help, Bolivia risks repeating the history of its original land reform, sparked by a 1952 revolution in which poor Aymara and Quechua Indians in the Andean highlands seized the haciendas on which they worked from their European-descended owners. A law divvied up the haciendas into small farms the following year. But during the next decades a lack of government support doomed many of them.

The 1952 revolution hardly touched eastern Bolivia, where Santa Cruz was then a small, remote city without a highway connecting it to the capital, La Paz, 550 km to the west. In the years since, waves of immigrants chased booms in sugarcane, cotton, and soy, scraping the countryside around Santa Cruz clear of jungle and setting up the large farms now central to Bolivia's economy.

Santa Cruz's frontier capitalists are deeply suspicious of Morales' new brand of Andean socialism, and a widely circulated government list naming some of Bolivia's largest landowners many with strong ties to the conservative opposition has only stoked their fears. Santa Cruz cattle rancher Luis Saavedra's 16,000 ha are on Morales' list, and he disputes the implication that his land is either ill-gotten or unproductive. "The government says we don't work, and that's just not true," Saavedra told the Associated Press. "I work from sunup to sundown, and the money I have has been hard earned."

For now, no one can be sure whose land and how much land Morales' reforms will affect. Wary of future expropriations, banks in Santa Cruz are no longer accepting land as collateral for loans, sending area farmers scrambling for credit.

In the meantime, Pueblos Unidos, 200 km northwest of Santa Cruz, must find fuel for the tractors and plant a soy crop by mid-January to take advantage of the rainy season. Velasquez dreams of a paved road that will one day deliver their crops to market. But until then, to reach the nearest doctor or school, it's a day's drive on a dirt road that often becomes impassable in the rains.

"The people here say, who is our god? Our god is Evo, because the other one has never given us anything. It's Evo you have to ask for things, they say. Send your prayers to him," said villager Fernando Mendoza, 53. "There are so many people with nowhere to go, with nowhere to work. And Evo, he remembers that."

Conflict grows

Land reform is among several resource-redistribution efforts that Morales promised during his campaign and that will likely buoy his popularity among the poor majority in the notoriously volatile Bolivian political climate. But it is also a key factor in galvanizing his opponents. The president suggested on Nov. 24 that the nation's new Constitution should eliminate the opposition-controlled Senate, rebuking conservative senators who have walked out of the chamber in a bid to block his sweeping land reform.
Six of Bolivia's nine state governors have since angrily broken ties with the Morales administration, and three regional assemblies have declared states of emergency to protest his policies. Even the owner of Bolivia's Burger King franchises went on a hunger strike to protest the president's handling of the assembly rewriting Bolivia's Constitution (see NotiSur, 2006-12-08). The women of Santa Cruz have since called a hunger strike of their own.

The government has publicly accused some of Bolivia's most politically powerful families of large-scale land fraud, adding a layer of personal animosity to an already charged issue. In Cochabamba, protests by warring groups of demonstrators supporting either Morales or the local governor led to two deaths and more than 100 injuries in January.

"These are the impositions of a minority group that has been defeated in national elections, city elections, and elections for the Constituent Assembly," Morales said in response to opposition protests and to his legislative opponents. When the majority in the lower house of Congress passed the INRA reform, conservative lawmakers walked out in protest.

Vice President Alvaro Garcia Linera chided the boycotters. "When we were a minority in Congress, we never walked out when the majority was sweeping anything through Congress whenever it felt like it," Garcia said. "We stood our ground, defended our cause, and we eventually were able to change the law."

Soon after, the law passed in the Senate, allowing Morales to claim, "Now is the end of the latifundio in Bolivia. We have the instrument to finish off the landlords of the east." A crowd of hundreds of indigenous people celebrated the legislative win in front of the Palacio de Gobierno. When handing out 2,000 individual land titles in August as he promoted the law, Morales said, "The idle lands in eastern Bolivia that have been run by political interests and powerful families, these lands must be returned to the Bolivian state so that they can be redistributed. That is our great desire."

Morales had kicked off his reform effort earlier in June by giving about 24,800 sq km of state-owned land to poor Indian groups. "Now comes the time for the government to take action, and that is much more difficult," said Fundacion Tierra's Urioste. "The time for discussion, for accusations, is over." Urioste estimates it will take a year to build a government agency capable of overseeing Bolivia and determining which private lands are unproductive and should be seized. Morales may also face difficulties in setting a fair standard by which to define idle land. While the new law requires the government to check for unproductive lands every two years, Bolivia's soy farmers say their fields need to lay fallow up to five years to properly rotate their crops. [Sources: Guardian (UK), 11/15/06; BBC News, 11/22/06; www.telesur.tv.net, 08/02/06, 11/20/06, 11/27/06, 11/30/06; La Razon (Bolivia), 08/04/06, 10/09/06, 10/11/06, 11/20/06, 11/30/06; La Republica (Peru), The Miami Herald, 11/30/06; Los Tiempos (Bolivia), 10/11/06, 10/23/06, 11/20/06, 11/30/06, 12/01/06, 12/05/06; El Nuevo Herald (Miami), 08/02/06, 11/16/06, 11/17/06, 11/20/06, 11/22/06, 11/30/06, 12/12/06; Associated Press, 08/02/06, 11/25/06, 11/29/06, 11/30/06, 01/13/06]

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