

8-7-2009

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Recommended Citation

LADB Staff. "Environmentalists, Church Protest Brazilian Government's Land Decree." (2009). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/notisur/13802>

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Environmentalists, Church Protest Brazilian Government's Land Decree

by LADB Staff

Category/Department: Brazil

Published: 2009-08-07

On June 25, 2009, Brazilian President Luiz Inacio Lula da Silva made one the most questioned decisions by environmentalists, Indians, the Catholic Church, and other civil-society groups in his entire six and a half years in office. On that date, Lula signed Medida Provisoria 458 (MP 458), which regulates how the federal government legalizes occupied lands in the Amazonia Legal. With Lula's signature, MP 458 became Lei 11.952 and was published in the Diario Oficial da Uniao on June 26. In practice, the MP legalizes the takeover of public areas in the Amazon that began during the 1964-1984 military regime, which promoted occupation of the region. This means that 67 million hectares an area the size of France and Italy will pass into the hands of rural landowners, mostly large landowners.

The value of the "vacant land" in this area is estimated at close to US\$35 billion, equivalent to four times the assets of the Banco do Brasil, the largest public Brazilian bank. Measure benefits large landowners Marina Silva, former environment minister and Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) senator from the state of Acre, said the MP especially benefits large landowners. The 400-ha plots that were legalized, corresponding to 81.1% of the total occupants, cover 7.8 million ha.

However, the large tracts, which are occupied by less than 7% of the settlers, cover 49 million ha, or 72% of the total legalized territory. Sen. Silva was one of those who most strongly objected to the signing of MP 458. Along with various sectors of civil society, she always asserted that, to reduce rural violence, the solution for legalizing lands in the Amazonia Legal must be conditioned on environmental-economic zoning (as the governors of the states of Acre and Rondonia did). This would avoid takeovers of private areas of interest for conservation or other public uses. It is expected that close to 300,000 campesino squatters will have legalized their properties.

There was a large public mobilization against MP 458, which many consider a legalization of deforestation, practiced by most occupants of the public areas of the Amazon for decades. And, as is known, Amazon deforestation is Brazil's major contribution to the generation of greenhouse gases that cause global warming.

But President Lula signed the MP, which brought strong objections from, for example, the Associacao Brasileira de Reforma Agraria (ABRA). "The measure will legalize the lands of the land grabbers in the Amazonia," said Plinio de Arruda Sampaio, president of ABRA. He says that the MP will create a large market in land in the Amazon and promote agribusiness and abusive takeovers in the region, with increased soy and sugarcane growing and cattle ranching.

President Lula vetoed Article 7 of the MP, which would have legalized lands in the hands of businesses and agents, that is, representatives of other persons or groups. Curiously, Lula has been criticized by organizations representing rural landowners for having carried out that veto.

Sen. Silva considers that now, with the MP approved, there should be total transparency in the legalization process precisely to avoid the transfer of smaller plots to large rural landowners. And

she believes that the Comissao de Direitos Humanos should closely monitor the development of the process.

Groups say measure rewards land grabbers

The veto of Article 7 was requested by, among others, the 150 participants of the international symposium Mudancas Climaticas e Justica Social (Climate Change and Social Justice), sponsored by the Conferencia Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil (CNBB), Misereor (a German Catholic aid agency), and various other partners June 8-10 in Brasilia.

According to the institutions that signed the letter, among them the Comissao da Caridade, da Justica e da Paz and the Comissao para a Amazonia, both part of the CNBB, in its present form MP 458 can "validate unfair and illegally obtained appropriations of public lands." The organizations also said that the MP condones amnesty for taking public lands in the Amazon, the increase of deforestation, and the destruction of ecosystems.

The "MP da Grilagem" (land grabbers' MP), as it has become known, is one of several federal government measures related to the Amazon that are causing alarm among various sectors of the public. Construction of new hydroelectric dams in the region is also causing great concern, especially among progressive sectors in the Catholic Church. This situation had repercussions at the 12th Encontro Intereclesial das Comunidades Eclesiasticas de Base (CEBs), a meeting of Christian base communities, held July 20-25 in Porto Velho, capital of the state of Rondonia.

During the meeting, there were several demonstrations against the predatory land takeovers that have taken place in the Amazon since the days of the military regime and are still taking place. Among those at the meeting was Antonio Possamai, emeritus bishop of the Diocese of Ji-Parana in Rondonia and vice president of the CNBB, who for many decades observed the land poaching in the region.

"The Amazonia was uninhabited land. And to appease the large movements of landless campesinos that arose during that period, the military promoted migration to the north to 'develop' that area. That's why we see so many agrarian conflicts that have caused thousands of deaths during years and years, the result of the brutish and irresponsible colonization," said the bishop, pointing out that the colonization is destructive because it promotes agribusiness rather than small farms. "The advance of soy, latifundios, livestock production, agribusiness, and the expulsion of small farmers caused the formation of medium-sized cities in the interior of the forest," said the bishop. Bishop Possamai stressed the need for the church to reaffirm its role in the region, so that "indigenous peoples, people living along the rivers, and African Brazilians can see, understand, and feel that they are not alone."

One of the most emotional moments of the CEB meeting was the "Caminhada dos Martires" (walk of martyrs) on July 22, with more than 3,000 participants, remembering the popular leaders who died in the land conflicts in the Amazon and who struggled for an orderly, nondestructive occupation of the region. Among those remembered were rubber-tapper and environmentalist Chico Mendes, assassinated Dec. 22, 1988, in Xapuri, Acre ([NotiSur, Feb. 23, 1993](#), and [Aug. 2, 1996](#)), and Sister Dorothy Stang, killed Feb. 12, 2005, in Anapu, Para ([NotiSur, Feb 25, 2005](#), and [June 6, 2008](#)).

Participants in the Caminhada dos Martires made a stop in front of the work at the Santo Antonio hydroelectric plant on the Rio Madeira, one of the plants projected for the Amazon. The proposed plant has caused large protests, as has the one proposed for the region of the Rio Xingu.

The occupation of the Amazon is, therefore, one of the Lula administration's most sensitive issues with Brazilian society. One of the questions regarding the way MP 458 was written and approved is the government's real effectiveness in resolving one of the major tragedies related to the region, the escalation of violence in rural areas. The Catholic Church's Comissao Pastoral da Terra (CPT) said that, between 1999 and 2008, there were more than 5,000 conflicts in the region, involving 2.7 million people, resulting in 253 murders, 256 attempted murders, and death threats against 1,377 people, mostly leaders of rural workers.

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