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José Pedro Martins

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Brazil: Pastoral Land Commission Renews Commitment To Agrarian Reform And Defense Of Biomass

by José Pedro Martins
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To continue "the struggle for land and territory, the struggle against large rural estates and agribusiness, and to incorporate, in the struggle for agrarian reform, present requirements for living together with different ecosystems and different cultures as people who live and resist, trying to build sustainable communities." This was one of the commitments made by the 760 participants in the III Congresso Nacional of the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (Pastoral Land Commission, CPT), held May 17-21 in Montes Claros in the northern Brazilian state of Minas Gerais.

The CPT was created in 1975, during Brazil's military dictatorship, at a meeting of the Pastoral da Amazonia in Goiania, capital of the central state of Goiás, called by the Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil (CNBB). From the beginning, the CPT was known for defending rural workers who were struggling for agrarian reform and protecting pastoral agents who began to be threatened by large landowners precisely because of their support for equitable land distribution, an important focus during the military regime.

The CPT's actions were, therefore, the expression of Brazilian Catholic Church sectors committed to agrarian reform and social justice in the countryside. However, the CPT has been ecumenical since its inception because of the presence of members of other Christian churches such as the Igreja Evangélica de Confissão Luterana no Brasil (IECLB). The CPT's national congresses have always provided an important opportunity for reflecting on the organization’s actions and, above all, on the progress of social movements' struggles for agrarian reform and justice for rural workers.

Disappointment with government support of agribusiness interests

Participants were clearly concerned with actions by sectors of the Brazilian government, especially those in concert with agribusiness. "We have heard vehement denunciations of a government that with one hand helps alleviate immediate hunger and misery, or even frees modern-day slaves, and with the other encourages, promotes, and finances this perverse growth model that undermines the sustainability of society and of life itself," said the final document of the meeting.

The majority (376) of participants at the congress were representatives of rural workers and social movements, such as the Quilombolas (descendents of escaped slaves), those occupying land, settlers, and Indians, among others. There were also 272 CPT agents, among them four bishops, and another 51 attendees, including priests, seminarians, and religious.

The CPT and other represented sectors and movements were also clearly concerned about the current environmental crisis both in Brazil and on the planet. This is evident early in the final document, which highlights the contrast between the human warmth in the host city and the situation in its physical environs resulting from the land exploitation in Minas Gerais: "Montes Claros' human warmth stands in clear contrast to the coldness of the interminable eucalyptus plantations and grazing land that has replaced the rich biodiversity of the Cerrado with the monotony of predatory monoculture in the landscape surrounding the city," the document said.
Although this is one facet of the environmental crisis and the multiple threats to natural resources, CPT congress participants also discussed the water-transfer project from the Rio São Francisco and initiatives such as the commitment of the congressional bloc of rural lawmakers to modify the law governing the Brazilian forest, which would increase degradation, especially by increasing deforestation. The bloc comprises deputies and senators who represent agribusiness interests in Congress, which writes Brazil's laws.

Since 2002, the CPT has followed the evolution of water conflicts in rural areas, documenting 388 conflicts between 2002 and 2009, including 87 in 2007 alone.

**Violence against rural workers continues**

However, the CPT is also very aware of and concerned with the continued physical violence against rural workers in Brazil. A CPT report released during the congress regarding rural conflicts in 2009 indicated that 854 land conflicts were registered in Brazil that year, up from 751 in 2008. The conflicts involved 83,000 families, constituting a veritable war in the countryside. Twenty-four people were murdered in land conflicts, compared with 27 in 2008. Land occupations by rural workers increased significantly: 290 in 2009, compared with 252 in 2008. A total of 1,184 land, water, and labor conflicts along with other conflicts related to rural areas occurred in 2009, compared with 1,170 in 2008.

Between 1985 and 2009, a period corresponding to the democratization process in Brazil following the 1964-1984 military dictatorship, 1,546 rural workers were assassinated, an average of 63 a year. An average of 90,000 families are involved in land conflicts each year. And on average more than 6,000 workers labor in conditions of virtual slavery, in blatant violation of all humanitarian and civilization precepts in the 21st century.

During the seven years of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's administration, 257 people have been assassinated in land conflicts, an average of 36.7 a year. The first year of Lula's administration, 2003, saw the highest number of land-related homicides, 71.

On June 25, 2009, Medida Provisória (MP) No. 458 went into effect (*NotiSur, Aug. 7, 2009*), becoming Ley 11.952, which, according to Universidade de São Paulo (USP) geography professor Ariovaldo Umbelino de Oliveira, quoted in the CPT report, expands the "possibility to regularize illegal appropriation of rural and urban public lands of the Amazonia Legal."

The impunity enjoyed by perpetrators of assassinations and other forms of violence against rural workers and defenders of agrarian reform continues to be a principal concern of the CPT and other sectors and social movements represented at the congress. In 1,546 homicides during the 24-year period, only 85 suspects were tried, with 20 convicted of planning and ordering the killings and 71 convicted of carrying out the murders.

As a tangible sign of their commitment to agrarian reform, congress participants reiterated their support for the popular referendum that will be held in September 2010 regarding the maximum size of private properties in Brazil. It will be conducted along with the annual Grito dos Excluídos (Cry of the Excluded), promoted by the CNBB, on Sept. 7, the date Brazil celebrates its independence from Portugal in 1822.

Congress participants also reiterated the "need to help with linkages and with strengthening rural and urban grassroots organizations to be protagonists in building the new political project for Brazil
that we want, together with the other Latin American countries, and to move toward a just and fraternal globalization."

"We are going to struggle because that is our cause," indigenous cacique Odair Borari of Santarém, Pará state, said during the event. Pará has the majority of land conflicts in the Brazilian Amazon and the majority of threats against indigenous peoples.

The congress approved a motion of support for threatened indigenous peoples of Brazil, such as the Potiguara people of Paraíba, who "struggle to preserve their land under pressure from the sugar mills and other businesses," and the Borari Indians of Pará, who "struggle to have their land recognized, which has been invaded by lumber workers." Special solidarity was expressed with the Guaraní Kaiowá Indians of Mato Grosso do Sul, whose reality "is the most cruel and violent of our country and merits the strongest rejection. They were driven off their lands and now live in destitution in small groups that do not have the most basic conditions for survival, where they are pushed to secondary roads, far from their traditional land, subject to weather, hunger, thirst."

Finally, the CPT congress reaffirmed the strong position of large sectors of the Christian churches and social movements in Brazil calling for a new development model: sustainable, marked by agrarian reform, social justice, and respect for the traditional rights of indigenous peoples, Quilombolas, and other peoples of regions like the Amazonía.

In this presidential-election year, whoever succeeds Lula can expect intensified actions by Brazil's social movements, including the struggle for agrarian reform. On May 25-28, the II Assembléia Popular Nacional-Mutirão por um Novo Brasil took place in Luziania, Goiás state, with the participation of representatives of grassroots social movements and various sectors and struggles. On June 1, the Congresso Nacional da Classe Trabalhadora was held, which for the first time brought together representatives of five union federations in Brazil: Central Unica dos Trabalhadores (CUT), Força Sindical, Central dos Trabalhadores e Trabalhadoras do Brasil (CTB), Nova Central Sindical de Trabalhadores (NCST), and Central Geral dos Trabalhadores do Brasil (CGTB).

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