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Landownership Dispute Heats Up in Paraguay

by Andrés Gaudín

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The ongoing struggle between Paraguay's landless campesinos and the Brazilian-born large agricultural producers who have taken over the country's richest farmlands has entered a new phase. The administration of President Fernando Lugo is investigating the legality of property titles held by the soy growers, known as Brasiguayos (NotiSur, Nov. 7, 2008). The president contends that if, as most of society believes, a significant part of the 8 million hectares in question was "ill-gotten"—obtained fraudulently or through corruption—he could put his hands on an enormous amount of land that would allow him at long last to initiate his eagerly awaited and until-now-frustrated agrarian-reform program. The campesinos agree.

The Brasiguayos claim they are being persecuted, victims of the "communist totalitarianism" embodied by Lugo, a discourse more appropriate to the bygone days of the Cold War that, nevertheless, has its adherents in 21st century Paraguay, which is incredibly tied to the past.

The rightist opposition ignores the nation's best interests and in a spirit of solidarity gives way to the Brasiguayos' discourse. The military, a class still omnipresent in South American countries, continues stirring up the specter of democratic instability and shamelessly talks of an "institutional break," that is, a coup, as do rightist legislators.

Ill-gotten lands could be used for land reform

Lugo believes that most Brasiguayo-held lands were obtained through corruption. Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff's administration is busy defending its nationals or their descendants without first determining whether the allegations against them are true.

Since Lugo took office 42 months ago, the right has been particularly active. Political parties linked to the dictatorship of Gen. Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989), business organizations, associations of retired military (influential within the barracks), and the enormous majority of press outlets have given no leeway to the former Catholic bishop who left the ministry to enter politics.

The opposition frequently touts the threat posed by the Ejército del Pueblo Paraguayo (EPP), an alleged guerrilla group whose existence is doubted by most analysts, and it pressures Lugo to militarize the northern departments of San Pedro and Concepción, the same area where Lugo carried out his pastoral activities, including encouraging landless campesinos to organize (NotiSur, May 14, 2010).

The right dominates both houses of Congress; it could send the military to the "conflict zones," but chooses not to, preferring that Lugo do so to create a confrontation between the president and his social bases. Thus, between October and November 2011, the government was forced to declare a state of emergency in the north of the country. No members of the EPP were found, no arms that could belong to them, but the military presence in the area was ominous, and the person who got the blame was the president.

"We want security, and we have never been so afraid," said the mayor of La Horqueta in the department of San Pedro. "The state of emergency destroyed us, many people quit bringing their
products to market for fear of the military checkpoints, and the people were left without the most basic necessities."

**Land giveaways did not stop when dictatorship ended**

In late September, shortly after the troops had arrived in the north, the conflict between the landless campesinos and the Brasiguayos heated up. The campesinos belonging to the Liga Nacional de Carperos (LNC) demanded the lands held by Brazilian producers in the eastern department of Alto Paraná on the border with Brazil. The carperos (tent dwellers) set up precarious tents and tarps along the highway, forming irregular settlements. They insist the disputed properties are ill-gotten, the result of corruption during the dictatorship.

Since the Brasiguayos lack proper titles, the government sent a working team to the area from the Instituto de Desarrollo Rural y de la Tierra (INDERT) to carry out demarcation, a necessary step so the judiciary can then decide whether the titles are legal. INDERT is the state agency that would carry out an agrarian-reform program. Harassed by the Brasiguayos, the technicians were unable to do their work and returned to Asunción in early February.

"The security forces will use all available means to avoid violence," said Lugo on Feb. 5, while opposition lawmakers and the media spoke of imminent clashes between the carperos and the Brasiguayos. The president admitted that, in the past, lands were improperly sold in the department of Alto Paraná and in other parts of the country, and he said that the judiciary must determine who the real property owners of the disputed lands are.

In a communiqué dated Feb. 6, Lugo was even clearer, saying that "rural real estate was often sold to those favored by the political and economic powers, which has caused suspicions of fraud and conflicts such as those happening today in Nacunday," the center of tensions in Alto Paraná.

The president did not say so, but everyone in Paraguay knows that at the heart of the conflict is the handing over of land to Brazilian citizens promoted by the Stroessner dictatorship, which wanted Brazil to be a partner that would counterbalance Paraguay's dependence on Argentina, its other large neighbor.

In Alto Paraná alone, 257,000 hectares of land could have forged property titles. In many cases, duplication and even multiplication of such papers has been proven. All the complaints indicate that Brazilians have not been the only beneficiaries of the corruption. Those holding ill-gotten land titles today also include former government officials and military who served during the dictatorship. The LNC says multinational companies could also have obtained lands improperly.

**Analyst warns about danger of xenophobia**

In an interview with the Uruguayan weekly Brecha, Magui Balbuena, president of the Coordinadora Nacional de Organizaciones de Trabajadores Rurales e Indígenas (CONOTRARI), said that the corrupt land giveaway happened not only during the dictatorship but continued until a few months before Lugo took office. "There are many questions about how in a very short time—not more than ten years—the best lands along the border have ended up in the hands of foreigners," she said. "Those tracts are dedicated to soy cultivation, the monoculture export and principal source of foreign exchange."

Balbuena says that the Brasiguayos have "cleared the land, dried up streams and estuaries, and poisoned rivers with the abusive use of agrotoxins." The campesino leader then made a key
observation, pointing out that "a dangerous patriotic fervor has arisen on the border, surreptitiously encouraged by retired military and legislators who visit the area."

When she says "a dangerous patriotic fervor," Balbuena is really talking about xenophobic manifestations, including among carpero leaders (NotiSur, July 16, 2010). Eulalio López, an LNC leader, referred disparagingly to the Brasiguayos in contrasting them with what he called "pure Paraguayans." Newspapers and radio frequently quote López saying, "Brasiguayos don't exist, we have pure Paraguayans and Brazilians, and the pure Paraguayan is the one who speaks Guarani, sings our national anthem, uses our currency, and proudly raises the red, white, and blue Paraguayan flag."

It would be serious for the right "to continue encouraging these forms of hollow and senseless nationalism, since more than 300,000 of the country's 6.3 million people are Brasiguayos, nearly 5% of the population," wrote an analyst on the independent Web site www.ca.com.py on Feb. 3.

Opposition Deputy Efraín Alegre, president of the congressional Comisión Permanente, which meets during the legislative summer recess, travelled to Nacunday on Jan. 24, ate carne asada with Brazilian producers, returned to Asunción that evening, and said, "We're on the verge of a violent confrontation in Paraná, and the government ought to send troops immediately."

Gen. Bernardino Soto Estigarribia, Army commander in chief until late 2008 and president of the Foro de Generales y Almirantes Retirados, warned on Jan. 26 of "the imminent risk of an institutional break." (Soto and another former Army commander are accused of having received lands through corruption.)

And, the rightist daily ABC Color editorialized on Jan. 27 that "the government must set limits on the carperos, and for that it has the Army."

Tranquilino Favero, the most powerful Brasiguayo with almost 1 million ha (NotiSur, July 29, 2011), said, "The government's continued complicity with the carperos will endanger the 2013 presidential elections."

CONOTRARI took note of the calls to insubordination and reflected, "Paraguay's principal problem is agrarian; there is a profound contradiction between the 400,000 landless families and the 300,000 Brazilians who not only occupy lands along the border but have also moved into the Chaco. This is a forested area,

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