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Paraguay: Catholic Bishops Deny Church Involvement In Land Occupations

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On March 17, the Paraguayan Bishops Conference sent a letter to Interior Minister Ret.Gen. Orlando Machuca Vargas rejecting accusations of Church involvement in campesino land occupations. On the other hand, said the bishops, the Church cannot condone "irrational" and "non-persuasive" or repressive measures used against agricultural workers. President Gen. Andres Rodriguez recently expressed concern about a potential deterioration of relations between the government and the Church due to the presence of priests and other religious and laypersons at land occupations. Interior Minister Machuca Vargas also denounced such "participation" by the Church in a recent letter to Bishops Conference president Msgr. Jorge Livieres Banks. The Conference statement said Machuca Vargas had exaggerated the number of priests present at land occupation sites. In addition, most of the priests in attendance did not wear their habits and thus were not representing the Church. Next, the Conference pointed out that the presence of religious during land occupations had often prevented violence. The bishops reiterated that clergy members had never encouraged agricultural workers to take over land or anything else. The Conference stated that private property is legitimate but not an absolute right, nor can it be used as an excuse to ignore much more important rights related to simple survival. Since the overthrow of the Stroessner dictatorship in 1989, land occupations have become more common as demands for agrarian reform have increased. According to experts, about 150,000 agricultural worker households are landless, and the situation could deteriorate further. At least 50% of Paraguayans are rural residents and depend on agriculture for their livelihood. Land ownership is highly concentrated. (Source: Spanish news service EFE, 03/17/92)

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