

Land and Human Rights in Paraguay

What happened in Curuguaty? The case of Marina kue

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Paraguay is one of the smallest countries in South America, surrounded by the giants Brazil and Argentina with no direct access to the ocean. It was ranked the fastest growing economy in Latin America last year with a 13 percent growth rate, while its human development index was the lowest in South America and 40 percent of its 6.8 million people continued living in poverty.

Still a largely rural country, Paraguay's economic development is based mostly on agriculture and livestock, principally soy and beef, which comprise nearly 80 percent of total exports. Paraguay is the world's fourth largest exporter and sixth largest producer of soy. Yet while agriculture is the basis of its economic growth, poverty is three times higher in rural than in urban areas.

Lack of access to land is one of the main factors that perpetuate rural poverty in Paraguay, where land is more inequitably distributed than anywhere else in Latin America. The most recent census (2008) indicates that 80 percent of agricultural land is held by just 1.6 percent of landowners, with the 600 largest properties occupying 40 percent of the total productive land. By contrast, more than 300,000 family farmers have no land at all.

This problem has worsened in recent years due to the expansion of large-scale monoculture, particularly of soy. Corporate farming has benefited from incentives, tax exemptions and access to credit, as well as an extremely lax enforcement of environmental and labor regulations, while the small-farm sector has been abandoned by public policies and affected by the lack of investment. The result has been a two-tier model of agriculture that increases exclusion by favoring the concentration of land, wealth and political power in few hands.

During the 35 years of the Stroessner dictatorship (1954-1989) over eight million hectares of state-owned land (20 percent of total land) were given away or sold at negligible prices to friends of the regime, who accumulated huge tracts of land. This led to numerous land conflicts, as the State has failed to reconstitute these "ill-gotten" lands to their legitimate use stipulated by agrarian reform laws. Land occupations have become the last resort for landless people to force the State to comply, and the Paraguayan countryside continues to be beset by conflicts that pit family farmers against large-scale agribusiness.

Access to land is literally a matter of life and death in Paraguay. Over 130 small-scale farmers have been murdered there since the end of the Stroessner dictatorship, the vast majority over conflicts to defend land rights. One such conflict in 2012 precipitated the political trial leading to the impeachment of President Fernando Lugo, whose election four years earlier had broken the more than 60-year stronghold by the conservative Colorado Party over Paraguay's government.

On 15 June 2012, 300 police in riot gear violently evicted a group of 60 landless farmers who had been peacefully occupying an area of land known as Marina kue in eastern Paraguay.

Eleven farmers and six police were killed and an undetermined number of people wounded by gunfire. There has been no official, unbiased report of what occurred that day. All community members were charged with crimes, making them ineligible as witnesses, and their tents and belongings were burned by police after the massacre, eliminating evidence. There has been no investigation into the police actions and conduct, or into the civilian deaths and mistreatment of the wounded. Charges remain pending against several farmers for illegal invasion of private property and causing the massacre, though none are charged with individual crimes.

But the land that had been occupied by landless farmers is not private land. In May this year the government again confirmed that Marina kue belongs to the State, following the Supreme Court's decision in April to reject a claim to the land by the company Campos Morombí, owned by the powerful Senator Blas N. Riquelme, a former Colorado Party president.

The land of Marina kue – 2,000 hectares in the Curuguaty district of Canindeyú department – was donated to the Paraguayan military in 1967 by Paraguay's then largest and most powerful landowning company, La Industrial Paraguaya (LIPSA). The land transfer was never registered by the State, but the social function of the land was formally recognized in 2004 when the State transferred the property to the National Institute for Agrarian Reform (INDERT), five years after the military vacated the land due to logistical problems. By 2004 the company Campos Morombí, which had acquired neighboring land from LIPSA, had already occupied part of Marina kue for cultivation and claimed its ownership. But such claims have been rejected by the courts on several occasions.

In an effort to get access to land to improve their livelihoods, over 260 landless youth and their families from Curuguaty organized through a local farmer's movement and appealed to INDERT in 2004 to transfer the land of Marina kue to them as land reform beneficiaries. Faced with government inaction, some community representatives occupied the land at various times over the following years to bring attention to their appeal. Following complaints by the company Campos Morombí, they were repeatedly, though peacefully, evicted. But they were unwilling to give up their struggle for land, as they knew the company had no legitimate or legal right to Marina kue.

Today over 40 local and national organizations in Paraguay have come together in the coalition Articulación Curuguaty to support the youth and families that have been organizing to claim their right to the land of Marina kue. They are asking for support in the form of letters from US Members of Congress and the international community addressed to President Horacio Cartes of Paraguay, urging him to meet their three demands:

- 1) Legally transfer the State land of Marina kue to the landless youth and families of Curuguaty;
- 2) Conduct an independent investigation into the 15 June 2012 massacre; and
- 3) Bring those responsible for the massacre to justice and release community members detained under false pretenses.



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