

Massacre in the department of Caaguazu - Paraguay

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On

June 26 2005, Brazilian growers of genetically modified soy, protected by the police and military, attacked Tekojoja peasant community in Caaguazu, Paraguay. They evicted 270 people and burnt down

the crops and all 54 houses. 2 men, Ángel Cristaldo and Luis Torres were killed, many were injured and 130 people, many of them women and children, were arrested.

56 peasants families live in Tekojoja peasant community, a land settlement of 500 hectares, located 70 km from the city of Caaguazu in Paraguay. The peasant community of Tekojoja is part of the Organización Agraria y Popular and MCNOC (National coordination platform of peasant organisatiosn) Via Campesina Paraguay. They are also involved in the Frente por la Soberanía y la Vida (Front for Food Sovereignty and Life).

Caaguazu and San Pedro are the regions in Paraguay where the greatest expansion in GM soy monocultures has taken place over the last 5 years. There are 2 million hectares of GM soy monoculture in Paraguay and the government is planning 2 million hectares more. In Paraguay less than 2% of the population owns 70% of the land and these big land owners are responsible for expelling peasants from their historical territories. GM soy grown for export is a principal cause of this severe situation: during the last few years, the rate of land conflicts have multiplied. In 2004 alone there were 162 land conflicts and 118 land occupations.

Tekojoja is one of the peasant settlements recovered during the period of land reform. However, many of these estates are once more in the possession of private big land owners due to corruption, illegal

manoeuvres and dishonest ploys that tricked the peasants out of their land. Since its beginning, the Tekojoja community has been threatened by the increase in monocultural GM soy cultivation. Adelin Osperman is a Brazilian

GM soy producer who wants to control this territory. He began legal proceedings against the peasants even though the settlement was legally recognised 3 years ago by the current government of Nicanor Duarte Frutos. Carlos González, a member of the Coordinación de la Organización Agraria y Popular states that " the judge in charge of the juridical process has never taken into account that these land belonged to the state and were donated to the peasant organisations with the land reform program". In August 2004, an attempt to evict the the community resulted in several arrests and injuries.

On Friday 25 June, at 5.30 in the morning, attorneys Pedro Torrales and Nelly Varela appeared with 150 policemen with the intention of evicting the whole community. Throughout the eviction and in the presence of the attorneys, people were brutally harassed and beaten. The police evicted and arrested people and afterwards paramilitary groups burned the houses and demolished them with caterpillar tractors. In total 130 people including 40 children were arrested and taken to the local jail in Caaguazu. Galeano, a community spokes person informed us that after

the incident 29 men, 19 women and 40 children have been released. Several peasants have been missing since Friday. During the eviction, the legal land owner Adelin Osperman (Brazilian soy producer) and his hired gunmen drove onto the land in trucks and shot at the peasants, killing Angel Cristaldo (20 years old) and Leopoldo Torres (49 years old) and severely injuring 5 more people in full view of the policemen present at the settlement. The Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos, the National Commission of Human Rights of Paraguay is covering the health care costs, as since the health and social services have been privatised, poor people no longer have access to health care.

Ademir Oppermann and several of his gunmen have been arrested for the murders. During their arrest, whole arsenal of weapons were found, including 4 shotguns, 2 of calibre 12 and 2 of calibre 20, one revolver calibre 38, and bullets packages for shotguns, all of which were found in the trucks that had driven into the peasant community to destroy houses and crops. The actions of these paramilitary groups have been widely denounced during recent years. The majority of the evictions take place with the help or collaboration of paramilitary and police groups. In January this year Jorge Galeano, a peasant leader of the community, publicly denounced Opperman for hiring armed groups to terrorise peasant communities.

The main priority now is to help the 270 people that have lost all their belongings and had to return to their land which has been stripped bare. The landowner took away 3 trucks with items belonging to the peasants but only one has been recovered and it is in the hands of the police. The whole community is now facing the winter without clothes, food and shelter.

According to Galeano, one of them, Nelly Varela ordered the police to take children out of school and put them in jail as they were criminals. The peasant organisation will try to meet the president of INDERT (Rural Development and and Issue Institution) and demand the protection of their lands by this institute. "Ko yvyko oremba'e, ha roî roproba haguãicha upéva; roguerekopa la documento ome'eva'ekue oréve Indert ha upévare ndorosé mo'ai ko'águi (this land belongs to us and we can show it, we have the documents from the government institution INDERT and we will not leave) stated Jorge Galeano.

We ask international organisations to spread this situation, network for solidarity actions and send human right observers to Paraguay. Many land conflicts occur during the soy crop season (dec - march) when the peasants' attempts to stop pesticide fumigation in their surroundings often lead to confrontations with the police and military guarding the soy fields.

The peasant communities need help in the form of support for legal advocacy and health care. They need to cover the costs of lawyers for the legal proceedings to defend their lands and denounce the violation of their rights. Health care has been privatized in Paraguay and the peasants do not have access to it. They are intensively poisoned by pesticides and are suffering from severe health problems and so need to do tests and buy medicines. The coordination peasant and indigenous women - CONAMURI- is currently pressing a court case against two

Brazilian soy producers accused of murdering a 11 years old boy,
Silvino Talavera by their reckless fumigation of Round Ready herbicide.