

Soya expansion and the paramilitarisation of the countryside

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This chapter investigates the many reports of violence against rural and indigenous communities in Paraguay who come into contact with the soya agro-export model. In many areas of Latin America there has been a rise in reported violence which comes with the expansion of the soya monoculture. This chapter does not intend to criminalise the crop itself, but to focus on the agro-export model responsible for the increase in violence by impeding access to the land.

Paraguay could be viewed as the country in which agri-businesses show their most brutal side, by evicting and attacking people with complete impunity. The militarization and para-militarisation of the countryside are linked to the increase of soya cultivation and the security systems of the agribusiness. The soya does not only grow on large estates, but a large proportion of this crop grows on the lands of the rural and indigenous populations. The Centre for Documentation and Studies (CDE) explains the background to the conflict as: "Within the rural settlements there is a process of dividing the land to create smaller farmsteads, particularly in the older farms. This is due to population growth. An additional consequence is the recent spate of forced evictions within the rural peasant communities because of the advance of mechanised and commercial agriculture."

Many international groups of observers have been witness to the violence metered out to rural communities in Paraguay by the owners of soya monocultures. The conclusions drawn by the international observation missions organised by FIAN¹ and Via Campesina in 2006 were categorical: "the unstoppable expansion of soya crops is the cause of the harassment, attacks, and assassinations at the hands of the police, the paramilitary, and private armed groups who are antagonistic towards the rural leaders."

There have also been statements made to a number of State and Human Rights organisations relating to the existence of death squads operating within the national police force. These have been responsible for the deaths, or executions, of at least 18 rural leaders. In other cases the murders of rural leaders has been carried out by security forces. The role of these organisations should be to protect the public, but during the times when agricultural conflicts intensify, they act as instruments of repression and social control, and they have been accused of carrying out illegal practices, such as evictions, destruction of property, torture,

¹ Food First Information and Action Network, is the international human rights organisation that promotes and defends rights to food. Founded in 1986, it has a consultative status at the United Nations Organisation.

murder, and attacks on the freedom of expression and religion, against anyone who does not follow their orders.

The second soya boom in Paraguay started in 2000 with the introduction of soya GM². During the last few years, this boom has been reflected in the alarming rise in the number of landless peasants. This is because the expansion of soya has mainly taken place on rural community lands, at a time when public land has become scarce. While, the rural communities that are surrounded by the soya monocultures suffer direct and indirect violence. The armed guards from the large estates that surround the rural settlements, or the guards of the “soya farmers” who rent lands within the communities mean para-militarisation, corruption of the forces of order and the harassment of the organised groups within these communities.

Paraguay also suffers from other types of violence within the soya model. These are deaths through poisoning, and include large-scale intoxications, “legal” evictions from the campesino’s own land, the transfer of national lands to foreign interest and the loss of food and national sovereignty.

The impunity that large Paraguayan landowners have enjoyed throughout history cannot be ignored in this analysis. It provides a optimal frame from which the agribusinesses can advance advantageously. This is one of the inalienable characteristics that attracts foreign investors into the country. They are attracted by the certainty of being able to act with impunity in order to establish their business in a territory where all that matters is how much capital one has, where there are no laws or moral principles. The change from dictatorship to democracy in the 1990s has not significantly improve the human rights situation³.

Since the dictatorship came to an end in 1989 more than 100 rural leaders have been assassinated. Of these, only one case has been investigated and the murderer convicted. The remainder remain at liberty. The criminalisation of demonstrations has also become a serious issue. In 2004, the rural organisations recorded 1.156 arrests within a population of 2,3 million people⁴. This is an alarming figure when compared to the same year in Brazil, where 421 arrests were made in a rural population of around 32 million.

² Genetically Modified.

³ In Paraguay there has been no court set up to try the crimes of the dictatorship. Nor have victims been compensated, nor has there been any investigations of the illegal accumulation of wealth taking place during the military process. There have been a number of denunciations in parliament regarding the estimated 12 million hectares of land awarded to the “faithful” friends of the ex-Dictator Stroessner.

⁴ In November 2004 the government decided to send the military into rural areas to contain the wave of occupations by landless people. In February 2005, 18 new military bases were created, the Departments of San Pedro, Concepción, Caazapá and Guairá, all areas with a high presence of peasant organisations.

Selective murders

The Chokokue¹ report published in 2007 by the Coordinadora de Derechos Humanos del Paraguay (CODEHUPY, the coordinator of human rights in Paraguay), found 75 victims of arbitrary executions within a preliminary census from 1989 to 2005 – the period of democracy in Paraguay. These are not all the reported cases, only the ones that have been confirmed.

The census report showed that the majority of those murdered were young males, grass-roots leaders involved in the recovery of the land to establish settlements for rural communities. Half of the 75 people murdered were aged between 20 and 39, and 45% did not possess any land of their own. Also, 66% of those murdered were grass-roots leaders or activists. These are the people who are more likely to be found in areas where there are conflicts over land, and they become the face of the rural resistance. Because of this, they are the most vulnerable. According to those involved, the purpose of many of these arbitrary executions is to terrorise rural communities, to stop social resistance and protests from spiralling, or to bring down grass-roots organisations. The majority of these crimes can be directly related to the large-scale expansion of monocultures. Thus, soya has serious effects on the young rural populations by preventing access to land and by engendering violence towards the organisations within the rural populations.

An important issue that needs pointing out is the significant rise in the number of executions since 1994. From this date, there have been 69 executions – on average, one every two months. This coincides exactly with an increase expansion of soya, which was growing at a rate of 150 thousand hectares per year⁵. In 1995 there were 88,000 hectares of soya; in 2003 this figure reached 2 million hectares, and today soya covers 2.4 million hectares.

The regions where more arbitrary executions have been carried out coincide with the frontiers of areas of mechanised agriculture, such as Concepcion, San Pedro, Caaguazu and Alto Parana. The latter three regions are the country's main soya regions, apart from Itapua. Paramilitary or hired assassins were the perpetrators of 53 executions, whilst the national police force was responsible for 22.

¹ Chokokue means peasant in guarani

⁵ In Paraguay, soya has maintained an average of 125 million hectares per year, representing a growth of 191% during the period of 1995/96 – 2005/06.

Analysis of the report shows that the modus operandi of the crimes committed, as previously mentioned, within the process of land acquisition by a community, and where the owners of the land, through the use of police or para-police forces, carry out ambushes to assassinate leaders of local groups. In the regions of Itapua and Alto Parana it is clearly evident that these murders are committed in the context of soya expansion, as are the cases in Santa Fe del Parana in Alto Parana. Here, in 2000, Francisco Espinola, the leader of the landless settlement "Santiago Martinez"⁶ was assassinated by hired killers of the estate owned by the Brazilian William Welter. Later, in 2005, another leader by the name of Cesar Marcos Ferreira was assassinated for the same reasons. These cases offer a picture of the violence which the Movimiento Campesino Paraguayo suffers because of its campaign to achieve the expropriation of lands that have been rented to soya farmers without adhering to the guidelines of the Agrarian Statute of Land Reform.

The violence against the community began in 1999 when the peasants denounced to the Land Tenure Institute – IBR an attempt of illegal eviction; Angel Luis Falabretti and William Welter, two soya farmers supported by the national police force, entered the settlement firing their weapons and destroyed the peasant's crops by spraying them with pesticides.

Other outstanding cases of the report are the murders in Itapua of Isidro Gomez Benitez in 1995 and Victor Diaz Paredes in 2002. Both of these took place during the occupation of lands belonging to the company Agrícola, Comercial, Industrial, Forestal S.A. (ACIFSA) owned by a Brazilian called Bortoloni. This same person appears once again suspected of the murder of two youths in 2004. Almir Brandt Kurtz and Bruno Carlos Da Silva were both shot dead by labourers on an estate that they were in occupying.

The most recent case of murder linked with the soya monoculture is that of the rural workers assassinated in August 2007 in San Vicente, in the Department of San Pedro in northeast Paraguay. This incident provides a clear example of the situation at the edge of the soya monoculture expansion, where the large estates are slowly strangling the population by preventing their access to natural resources. On the 18th of August, four campesinos left their settlement to go hunting in a place the frequented

⁶ The settlement is named after a leader of the Movimiento Campesino Paraguayo (MCP, the Paraguayan campesino organisation), who was assassinated in the Department of Caaguazu in 2001. It is suspected that his murder is linked to a retaking of lands by a large estate owned by the Oviedo family.



often – a hill located within a large estate of 93.000 hectares known as Agroganadera Aguaray, which was the property of Euvaldo de Araujo, a Brazilian who lives in Sao Paulo. The estate has been almost completely deforested in order to introduce large-scale monocultures in a rotation of soyaRR, maize, and wheat. The four men were unexpectedly ambushed and riddled with bullets by the estate guards who had constructed a hiding place from branches at the side of the path. These guards had been laying in wait with their calibre 12 rifles, waiting for their victims to pass by: just as in any hunting range. But this time the quarry were human beings. These same guards made statements to the police to say they had been following the orders of their employers. The foreman of the estate, a Brazilian called Matarazo is well-known in the area for his violence. In the past 12 years there have been 12 victims, either killed or wounded for entering the estate.

The violence of land occupations

The methods used to evict people from their land provide another example of the violence used against rural populations. In Paraguay, the majority of rural settlements exist as a result of land occupations by rural organisations, however there are continuous proceedings taking place to criminalise these actions. The advance of the monocultures is one of the major reasons for the lack of public land meant for land reform, and the high prices generated by land speculation increase its inaccessibility. The land privatisation has had serious repercussions on the violence of used in evictions and the persecution of landless people. The latest development is the reform of the legislation for trespass, which can impose a mandatory prison sentence of up to five years.

A prison sentence is used as a punishment against those who have no land and who campaign to acquire it in a country where 29,7% of the rural population are landless, and where 10% of the population owns 66,4% of the land, and the remaining 60% of the population owns the remaining 6,6% of the land⁷.

The evictions are characterized by the use of excessive force leaving many people injured, pregnant women and children are attacked, and people are detained on criminal charges for organising land occupations, or for reclaiming their own land. According to FIAN, these evictions signify a serious violation of human rights to food, to a home, physical integrity and freedom.

⁷ According to census data from 2002, carried out by the Direccion General de Encuestas, Estadisticas y Censo (Office of Surveys, Statistics and Census).

The last land occupation campaign organised by the National Coordination Board of Peasant Organisations MCNOC in 2006 resulted in many victims and reprisals. During the space of one month, the organisation mobilised more than 10.000 people in order to set up 15 land occupations throughout the country. The aim of this was to find settlements for 2.000 landless families. There was a tremendous wave of repression in response to this, and violence was used against the demonstrators. The evictions began in Itapua on the 31st of July with the fifth eviction of a community that had been campaigning to stay on the land for six years. Forty families were violently suppressed, and five members of the community were imprisoned for several days. This situation continued on the 9th of August with further evictions of new and established communities in Alto Parana, Caazapa and San Pedro. The eviction in San Pedro resulted in one casualty. On the 19th of August, the violence ended when over 1.000 people at a demonstration in Caazapa were suppressed, resulting in 51 being injured. During this occasion, and within a two-hour timespan, there were over 200 demonstrators suffering serious beatings.

Another one which has been registered in Paraguay in the Informe Alternativo de la Sociedad Civil sobre la situación de los Derechos Economicos, Sociales y Culturales (DESCs - Civil Society's Alternative Account relating to the situation of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights), is the case of the organisation of landless people known as the Comision Vecinal "Tetagua Guarani" (a neighbourhood committee) from the district of Iruna and Naranjal in the Department of Alto Parana. This group is made up of 1.200 families and since 2003 has campaigned for access to 15.000 hectares of land owned by AGROPECO S.A., a company that is suspected of incorporating large expanses of public land into its domain, and which has also deforested its whole area in order to grow soya. These are two reasons which provide sufficient justification for the expropriation of part of their land. Nonetheless, the landless settlement was cleared by violent means on three separate occasions during 2004. During these evictions police and armed private security groups working for AGROPECO destroyed crops grown by the campesinos to feed themselves, burned down their houses, destroyed their food and belongings, including beds, mattresses and clothes, and contaminated the water wells with rubbish and poisons. Furthermore, the police arrested 14 people. Among these were two women, one of whom was a single mother with seven children, and the other also had two children.

A symbolic example of the coldness and violence of the soya business were the murders which took place in 2005 during the evictions at Tekojoja in

the district of Vaqueria. This area has become known as the soya trenches. The recovery of lands by the MAP- Movimiento Agrícola y Popular (Social and Agrarian Movement) was begun in 2003 when the community was threatened by the community land being sold to Brazilian soya farmers resulting in the fragmentation of the community. The plots in question were legally meant for rural family smallholdings according to the Public Land Reform Program, and on this basis the MAP recovered the plots that had been sold illegally. Landless families settled on 320 hectares. During the following three years, these families suffered three evictions in which public prosecutors, the military, the police and the armed guards of the soya farmer took part, although there were no real court orders for any of these eviction attempts on the landless settlements. The evictions were agreed by other local judges which showed clear evidence of corruption.

As a consequence of these evictions, the settlers' crops were destroyed, their houses were burned down and their livestock was stolen. But the third eviction saw the greatest level of violence. For this operation there were eighty riot police (the 'blue helmets'), 40 police (public order and security) and two public prosecutors present. During the eviction, Ademir Opperman, the soya farmer who contested the settlement on this land, entered the settlement in 4-by-4 cars, trucks and tractors with a group of heavily-armed men and proceeded to rob, burn and destroy the houses in full view of the complacent police and prosecutors. The conflict ended with the arrest of approximately 150 people, including children. Opperman and his men opened fire on a group of settlers, wounding five of them and killing Angel Cristaldo, aged 20, and Leonicio Torres, aged 49.

Finally, the Supreme Court ruled in favour of the settlers in this land dispute and stated that the lands in the Land Reform Programme could not be sold to foreign businessmen, as under the Agrarian Legislation, they are not eligible to plots as these are meant uniquely to the families. At the current date, with help from the Pastoral Social de Caaguazu (a social concerns ministry of the church) 57 houses are being rebuilt for the affected families as part of the compensation for the abuse they have suffered. The trial of the double murder continues to this day, but Ademir Opperman scaped and disappeared after he was ironically sentenced to house arrest. Only one of the guards has been imprisoned. The court case has been suspended on several occasions and has experienced some serious obstacles.

Violence against those resisting the crop spraying

The intensive agriculture model uses another weapon to evict farmers and empty rural areas of their populations. Pesticides are the invisible weapon which is degrading living conditions for rural communities and making crops, livestock and people increasingly ill – to the point where the situation becomes unbearable and they have to leave in order to save their own lives. This fact was detailed in the investigation carried out in the previous chapter.

The most well-known case of poisoning caused by crop-spraying in soya plantations is that of the Talavera Villasboa family from Itapua. On the 2nd of January 2003, 11 year old Silvino Talavera was sprayed with pesticides whilst on his way home, as the soya producer, Herman Schlender, was spraying his land. When the boy arrived home, he did not mention what had taken place and the family cooked and ate the food he had brought home, which had also been sprayed. A few hours later, the whole family became ill, suffering from nausea, vomiting and headaches. Silvino had been directly exposed to the pesticides and needed hospitalisation. Four days later he returned home from hospital, but that same day another soya producer, Alfredo Laustenlager sprayed his land, which was only 15 metres away from the Talavera home. The farmer took no notice of the wind direction that was blowing the toxic chemicals towards the family's home. After this second crop-spraying, three of Silvino's brothers needed hospitalisation, as did twenty of their neighbours. But Silvino's body could not tolerate another toxic assault and he died on the 7th of January 2003.

The consequences of the spraying can be detected in the following generations of those exposed to the chemicals. This is why five month old Vidal Ocampos died on the 11th of September 2006. Vidal was the son of Sofia Talavera, one of Silvino's sisters who had been poisoned after being exposed to the crop-spray. The baby's cause of death was hydrocephalus, a malformation of the central nervous system which can be linked to exposure to agro-chemicals. According to Sofia, the doctors have told her that she cannot have children because of the poisoning she suffered.

In April 2004, both soya producers were sentenced to two years in prison, which could be substituted by paying compensation to the Talavera Villasboa family for the sum of 50 million guaranies (around US\$ 8,000). Nevertheless, the sentence was annulled due to pressure from the powerful soyaRR producers, the agrochemical distributors, and local

politicians from the Department of Itapua. During new investigations initiated by the victim's family, on the 30th of October 2006 both soyaRR producers were again sentenced to two years imprisonment, this time without the option of substituting the sentence through compensation. But during the summer holidays, the prison measure was once again changed, and both of the sentenced men were released from prison. Even so, the precedent for murder has now been established, and from this case onwards, it may act as a deterrent to others.

The case of Silvino Talavera and his family demonstrates the impossibility of coexistence between the two models. The Talavera family farm organically, and even export organic soya to Europe through an NGO that provides certification. But the maintenance of an agrochemical-free farm is not enough to keep the family safe from poisons. The isolated islands of organic produce on rural family farms are lost in a sea of GM soya that is completely dependent on pesticides. This does not imply a change in the model, nor a guarantee of subsistence for rural families, but instead it creates an idealistic smokescreen that legitimises the agro-export model and provides it with a humane image.

Although Silvino Talavera's case is the most well-known, it is not the only one. In April 2006 the Paraguayan press published a series of articles about a rural community in Pirapo'i Itapua Poty, Itapua, where six babies had been born with congenital deformities (anencephalia). A newspaper report proved that "of the 57 families within the affected area, 17 houses are surrounded by soya crops, and the last three of the women who had the babies with anencephalia had conceived there". The investigation carried out by the Health Ministry finally published a report which concluded that the deformities did not have any connection to the agrochemicals. What was unusual was that the doctor in charge of the investigation refused to sign the document.

One of Paraguay's most tragic cases describes the violent treatment of people fighting to protect their health. This event took place in the community known as "Juliana Fleitas" in the Department of Caaguazu. The conflict began in 2004 when David Enns Hildebrand, a soya businessman, native of the Mennonite colony called Sommerfield, started crop spraying near the settlement without heeding any of the complaints made by the inhabitants. According to the Chokokue report, the communities within the area had "for a long time been denouncing the soya growers for the environmental contamination suffered by the small farmers who were being hemmed in by the large soya estates that were setting up in the

area. The rural farmers were complaining because the agrochemicals were causing serious problems to the health of the population, particularly to the children and older people. They were also suffering crop losses and livestock deaths. The number of people who became ill was so great that the local health centre could not provide medicines, as they had all been used up.”

In December 2003 conflicts and confrontations began to take place as the local campesinos began to block access to the soya fields for crop sprayers. There were clashes with the police, who were there to protect the crop spraying. Arrests took place, and there was a threat of an escalation of repression. Because of this situation, other neighbourhood associations answered the call for solidarity put out by “Juliana Fleitas” community.

On the 21st of January 2004, in the middle of a summer rainstorm, a truck from “Tekojoja Rekavo”, a neighbouring association which is a member of the Federación Nacional Campesina (the National Rural Federation) travelled towards the settlement to offer their support to the inhabitants. At the entrance to the community, the truck encountered a group of police who was assembled to carry out a raid on the settlement. Owing to the torrential rain on that day, the police and the state prosecutor had decided to postpone the action and wait for better weather. But a group of policemen set out to follow the truck from “Tekojoja Rekavo”. About a kilometre from the settlement, the police attempted to overtake the truck, but was unable to do this because of the narrowness and bad condition of the road. Because of the downpour, visibility was poor, and neither the truck driver nor the passengers of the truck were aware that they were being followed. The police began to fire at the truck. After the first round of bullets, the first victims collapsed in the back of the truck and panic broke out. The truck stopped and the police surrounded it. They continued to fire at the driver and in the interior of the truck. In total, 19 bullets were fired into the truck, 14 of which were aimed at the height of the torso or the heads of people travelling in the back. This massacre resulted in two fatalities (Mario Arzamendia Ledesma and Carlos Robles Correa), eight wounded, and twenty seven arrested. After the police had removed the dead, and taken the wounded to get medical treatment, they arrested the remainder. In 2005, after along and irregular trial, the Court sentenced two policemen to four years in prison. The reason for this attack is still unknown.

Conclusion

This essay has tried to put the human rights situation into context in relation to the agro-export model. A few documented cases have been described. These are representative of the situation across the country, but many other cases are still unknown where the local people and the organisations have not had the resources to document and spread the case.

The imposition of agribusiness and the inclusion in the global market has deepened the scars within Paraguayan society. The new wealth has converted itself into an ungovernable force, which is increasing the levels of corruption and violence against the rural populations. The Paraguayan government is an accomplice to this and participates in these operations. It even contributes to the criminalisation of poverty and the exclusion of displaced people in urban areas.

These brief summaries should engender thought about the social and environmental problems suffered as a consequence of the production of commodities such as soya. This situation cannot be remedied through technical solutions, the conflict goes beyond the environmental problems. It is better placed within the framework of armed conflict – a type of war against the campesinos. One can elucidate that behind this violence, the implicit strategy is to empty the countryside and then repopulate with a population that is submissive to the new powers. This submission would take the form of credits and dependency on market forces.

We can describe it as a war – a silent and hidden war that does not end in death. More than 20 million litres of agrochemicals are sprayed annually on Paraguayan land, and only in 2004 there were 400 people registered within the Ministry of Health's Centro de Vigilancia de Intoxicacion Aguda por Plaguicidas (Survey Centre of acute agrochemical poisonings).

This extreme reality is that countries importing soya and some of the large environmental NGOs tried to cover up. They have abandoned the vision of change and have submissively agreed to take part in Round Table meetings for Responsible Soya, with their banal criteria relating to technologies that have no basis whatsoever on what is happening. For the above reasons, at the two Round Table meetings that have taken place, demonstrations have been organised by the campesino and environmental sectors to show their rejection of these attempts at a corporate cover up. On both



occasions, the social movements produced extensive statements⁸, which fell on the deaf ears of the NGOs involved in the Round Tables, even though these statements left no doubt as to the violence experienced on a daily basis and the impossibility of sustaining the soya model. As Santiago del Estero, a campesino said in 2005, you cannot have dialogue with someone pointing a gun at you. In the same way, it is being made impossible for the rural population to find a solution with an economic sector that controls the strings of violence against the population.

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