Paraguay: Land of Inequality and Food Security

Delegation Report: August 2017
Alliance for Global Justice
www.AFGJ.org
From August 4-16th, 2017, the Alliance for Global Justice led its first-ever delegation to Paraguay, the country with most unequal distribution of land in the world and where Operation Condor's Archives of Terror were discovered in 1992. We were hosted by the Fundacion Celestina Perez de Almada (https://www.facebook.com/FcpaPy), founded by winner of the 2002 Alternative Nobel Prize Martin Almada, and named after his first wife who was tortured to death in prison by the U.S.-backed dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner.

Delegation participants came from Miami and New York City. For some, it was the first trip to South America. For others, it was a continuation of decades of solidarity with Latin America’s popular struggles and movements. Very few people in the United States, Latin American solidarity activists included, know much about Paraguay. As novelist Augusto Roa Bastos once described his native and insular Paraguay, it is a veritable “island surrounded by land.” Our delegation traveled to Paraguay in an attempt to break this isolation and with the aim of learning from and building solidarity with the courageous social movements that are struggling against brutal repression to achieve true democracy, establish justice and respect for the rule of law, and to advance the social and economic interests of the poor majority.

From the moment we arrived in Asuncion we were reminded of the centrality of the struggle for land in determining everything else in this nation of 6.8 million inhabitants. The trip from the airport to our hotel lasted longer than is usual because campesino marchers had taken over the streets in downtown Asuncion and blocked off key intersections, the reason for these protests being the unfulfilled promises and general lack of government support for small-scale agriculture and landless campesino families. Despite claiming that it would not be appropriate or fiscally prudent to subsidize campesino agricultural production the government effectively doled out US$282 million in subsidies to rich Paraguayan landowners in 2016 alone (http://ea.com.py/v2/subsidio-a-sojeros-y-ganaderos-en-el-2016-solo-en-impuesto-inmobiliario-rural-fue-de-us-282-millones/). A few days after our arrival we were invited to address the crowd of thousands of campesinos who were encamped in the plaza outside the national legislature as part of the mobilizations. We spoke in support of land reform to benefit Paraguay’s landless and small farmers and received thunderous applause.
At nearly every meeting we attended, whether in the city or countryside, whether with trade unions or indigenous organizations, the issue of extremely skewed land ownership was identified as being at the root of most of the country’s problems. The United Nations puts the Gini coefficient with regard to land ownership in Paraguay at 0.94 (with 1.0 being a state of absolute inequality in which one person possesses it all). (https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/22559/why-the-roots-of-paraguay-s-averted-constitutional-crisis-lie-in-the-countryside); U.S. Senator Patrick Leahy in statements he made on the Senate floor on November 12, 2014, noted that 80 percent of arable land in Paraguay is owned by just 1.6 percent of landowners. The problem is further compounded by the fact that much of this land is owned by foreign capital and international agribusiness thus increasing the drive toward production for export rather than domestic consumption (https://cuslar.org/u-s-congress-joins-social-movements-in-call-for-justice-in-paraguay/). For example, as demonstrated in the report “Con la Soja al Cuello” (“With Soy Up to Here”), published by the researchers we met with at the BASES-IS institute, the single largest owner of land in Paraguay is the World Unification Church (“Moonies”), which has in its hands 1,457,921 acres of Paraguayan territory (http://www.baseis.org.py/se-presenta-tercera-edicion-del-mas-completo-informe-sobre-agronegocios-en-el-paraguay/). According to Oxfam, the handful of political, business, and media elites that make up Paraguay’s ruling class base their power on the amount of land they have amassed, with the Zucolillo, Vierci, and [President Horacio] Cartes families—owners of competing media and business groups—figuring among the country’s 15 largest landowners. Expansive tracts of land are also owned by “brasiguayos” (Paraguayans of Brazilian descent or Brazilians who live on Paraguayan land) all along the border between Brazil and Paraguay, thus blurring the boundaries separating the two countries and leaving large swaths of Paraguay nearly empty as mechanized soy production, which displaces campesinos and poisons the land, requires very few workers.
There is courageous resistance, though, to these outrageous levels of inequality. On our third day in Paraguay, we traveled out to Marina Kue, site of the 2012 Curuguaté massacre, to meet with the campesino families living on state lands coveted by large (often drug-trafficking) landholders who can never seem to get enough. We met with family members of the 11 campesinos who were murdered by the state forces that invaded the community on July 15th, 2012. While four campesinos were sentenced in a sham trial and are serving sentences ranging from four to 35 years for the murder of six police officers that day, the murder of the 11 campesinos has never even been investigated. Crucially, the Curuguaté massacre was used as the pretext for the legislative coup against left-leaning President Fernando Lugo in 2012, removing from power before the end of his term the only President from outside the Colorado Party that Paraguay has had since 1947.
We paid a visit to the four campesino political prisoners from Curuguaty in Tacumbú, a prison in Asuncion that houses over 3,000 prisoners but was originally built for 800. They have not given up hope that with enough social pressure in Paraguay and support from abroad they will be absolved and released. We also visited others of their family members who have been camped outside the Palace of Justice, seeking justice, in the capital for over a year. As we heard repeatedly, justice in the Curuguaty case is not only important for those who have been caught up in this web of deceit and repression but vital to the long-term prospects for social justice in Paraguay. If the State gets away with its criminalization of dissent in this most emblematic and grotesque of cases the struggle for land reform and a better Paraguay will be seriously hampered.

Paraguay's land inequality is directly tied to the poverty and marginalization seen in the cities. On our second day in Asuncion, we visited the Cobañados network of community groups in Los Bañados, which are the "favelas" or "shantytowns" near the river separating Paraguay from Argentina that are inundated during rains with terrible floods. The government, working hand in glove with large real estate interests, has been trying to push people out of their homes to take the land near the river but the organizations of Cobañados, frequently led by women, have successfully resisted thus far. Many city-dwellers have already been displaced once before from their lands in the countryside and are not willing to be displaced again.
Many of those we met during our delegation traced the origins of Paraguay’s unequal land distribution to 1) the catastrophic Triple Alliance War (1864-1870), which ended with Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, and the foreign interests that helped to fan the flames of the bloody conflict, killing over 60% of Paraguay’s entire population and crushing the country’s independent path of economic development; 2) the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner (1954-1989), which laid the bases for the continued grip on power by Paraguay’s landed oligarchy through its political vehicle, the Colorado Party, that has governed the country for 67 out of the last 71 years. As reported by World Politics Review (https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/22559/why-the-roots-of-paraguay-s-verted-constitutional-crisis-lie-in-the-countryside), “According to Paraguay’s 2008 Truth and Justice Commission, of the 12.3 million hectares of land redistributed by the state between 1954 and 2003, 7.85 million hectares, much of it already settled, were illegally handed to business and military figures loyal to the government—a total area greater than the size of Panama.”
We were honored to meet with Paraguayans who fought the Stroessner dictatorship, many of whom suffered brutal imprisonment and torture and the disappearances of their loved ones. The murderous tyranny of Alfredo Stroessner had the backing of the United States government throughout its decades in absolute power and this included the training of the dictatorship's henchmen in the “science” of torture. At the Museo de las Memorias, a former detention center for suspected Communists and where shadowy CIA agent Robert Thierry had an office, a number of torture implements are on display. [The U.S. Embassy turned down our request for a meeting as part of our delegation.]
Among them are an electric prod used to apply shocks to prisoners, tweezer scissors for pulling out nails in the attempt to extract information or forced confessions, as well as a bathtub that was filled with human excrement and used for submerging prisoners into as they were beaten senseless, with fellow prisoners forced to listen to this routine savagery of their cellmates and comrades.
Parked at the entrance of the museum is a red Chevy nicknamed "Little Red Riding Hood" that was donated by the U.S. government to the Stroessner dictatorship and used as a torture and rape-mobile.

One evening, we had dinner with Dr. Rogelio Goiburú who has spent years searching for and exhuming remains from the dictatorship’s mass graves. His own father was disappeared 40 years ago as part of Operation Condor and has yet to be found. The Stroessner dictatorship formed an integral part of the CIA-supported Operation Condor, which brought together the right-wing dictatorships of the Southern Cone of South America in a campaign of mass terror against their own populations. It is estimated that 50,000 people were murdered, 30,000 disappeared and 400,000 imprisoned by the security services of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay during Operation Condor.
As we were told time and again, the Stroessner dictatorship may have been overthrown in 1989 but it continues in a new form. Power in all branches of government is still monopolized by the direct descendants and inheritors of the dictatorship and the State remains under the almost absolute control of the corporatist Colorado Party 28 years after the fall of Stroessner. To cite just one example, the judicial branch is so thoroughly subjected to the dictates of the country’s political and business elites that even the elitist World Economic Forum in its 2013-2014 Global Competitiveness Report declared Paraguay's judicial system to be the third worst in the world in terms of its level of independence (http://www.ultimahora.com/paraguay-es-el-tercer-peor-pais-del-mundo-el-ranking-justicia-n805886.html).

And though repression was indisputably more severe during the dictatorship, the State continues using the same methods of political sidelining, brute force, and targeted killings of opponents, according to director of Vidal Acevedo of SERPAJ-Py, who described to us the increased militarization of the north of Paraguay, where the Paraguayan People’s Army (EPP) is reputed to operate. Not coincidentally, this is also where the country's strongest campesino organizations are based. Since 1989, at least 130 campesinos have been assassinated for engaging in the struggle for land reform. Furthermore, in our meeting with the indigenous rights organization Tierra Viva it was explained to us that though the indigenous language Guarani is spoken by most Paraguayans, indigenous Paraguayans themselves remain the poorest and most discriminated against people in the country, with many living as virtual slaves on the Mennonite colonies in the Chaco region, a situation not too far removed from the dictatorship’s wanton physical extermination of indigenous Paraguayans and their way of life.
In spite of the adverse conditions, struggles from below continue and will likely pick up steam as the younger generations of Paraguayans refuse to tolerate living in the long shadow of the dictatorship. Alongside the dogged campesino movement whose occupations and direct actions have led to the freeing up of over 667,184 acres of land for the previously landless since 1989 (https://www.opendemocracy.net/democraciaabierta/toby-hill/rural-paraguayans-fight-for-land-amid-corruption-poverty-and-violence), students are mobilizing like never before. Last year, in an unprecedented wave of rebellion, university students demanding democratic reforms at the National University of Asuncion (UNA) went on strike and occupied the campus, paralyzing the university. It was “one of the largest protest movements in the country’s history” (https://nacla.org/news/2016/10/11/paraguays-student-spring). Similarly, the teachers, nurses, and journalists unions we met with have taken to the streets during the past few months to demand drastically needed improvements at the workplace and the democratization of Paraguayan society at large. On the day we met with former President Lugo in the Senate, we also walked by the remnants of the street protests, in the form of smashed windows and a burnt-out portion of the legislative building, that broke out in early 2017 and which ultimately defeated President Horacio Cartes’s underhanded reelection bid.
All of us on the delegation returned to the U.S. with a commitment to building support for the struggles of the Paraguayan people against a government of elites that is regarded as one of the most corrupt in the world. The challenges for Paraguay’s poor and working class are significant but not insurmountable. With our solidarity, we hope to improve the chances that one day the Stroessner dictatorship will truly be left in the dustbin of history and Paraguay’s majority will be free to chart its own course, free from the yoke of its landed oligarchy and the interference of imperialists whose sole desire remains the “use and abuse” of Paraguay.*

* In 2014, President Horacio Cartes told foreign investors, “I want you to feel at home, use and abuse Paraguay, because the truth is for me, (this is) an incredible moment of opportunity. Here you will feel at home, because you are at home. The land is yours, the country is yours.”
(https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2016-paraguay-president-horacio-cartes/)
Recommended Resources:

*The Paraguay Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, edited by Peter Lambert and Andrew Nickson

*The Condor Years: How Pinochet and His Allies Brought Terrorism to Three Continents* by John Dinges


Paraguay's Forgotten Coup: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RE-70bdH1c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8RE-70bdH1c)

La Metamorfosis del Paraguay: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CT4t5egRR0c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CT4t5egRR0c)

One Man's War: starring Anthony Hopkins: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzJEv4L0goY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QzJEv4L0goY)

The Mission: starring Jeremy Irons and Robert De Niro: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFkcNC8DPAU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFkcNC8DPAU)