

Indigenous Peoples and Peasants of Bolivia Press Government for Solutions

As the month of September brings the spirit of spring to the Andes, Indigenous organizations have again challenged the neoliberal government of President Sánchez de Lozada and Aymara vice-president Cárdenas. The call to march to La Paz by Indigenous peoples follows governmental failure to implement previously signed decrees in favor of Indigenous peoples—a state version of the ancient dictum, “I obey but I do not comply.” The government has obstructed the application of laws and delayed measures aimed at solving the problems over Indigenous territories. The main demand of the march is to enact at least nine Decrees signed by the Government after the massive Indigenous peoples’ march of close to 1 million to La Paz in 1990, and to have rural laborers integrated into the General Labor Law.

Indigenous leader Marcial Fabricano, representative of CIDOB (Confederation of Indigenous peoples of Bolivia) called for the march. He also organized the 1991 “March for Territory and Dignity.” Joining Mr. Fabricano in the organizing process are Román Loayza, representative of the CSUTCB, the national peasant confederation and Modesto Condori, representing CSCB, an organization of landless peasants also known as “colonizers.” It is the first time, Indigenous peoples, peasants, and landless rural workers have come together in a strong coalition. Urban workers, who have fared poorly because of neoliberal policies brought by governing parties MNR (Nationalist Revolutionary Movement) and MRTK (Revolutionary Movement Tupaq Katari), have lent their active solidarity.

The Decrees in question, which agreed to grant rights over land, should

have created Indigenous territories for the Siriono Indigenous peoples of the Isiboro National Park, Secure, Pillon, Chiman, Tim, Araona, Mosen, Chiman, Yuqi, Chiquitano, and Weenhayek (Mataco), all located in the eastern Amazon region. Their non-enforcement prompted the march, as well as more ongoing problems no different from similar areas other nation-states share in the Amazon basin. Ranchers, lumber companies, miners, and landless peasants consider the Amazon “an empty area,” lawless, and ideal for “colonizing.” Indigenous peoples have worked to defend their rights coordinating themselves nationally and forging international alliances to denounce this situation. Ranchers and landowners in the area continue to benefit from the conditions of lawlessness, and are actively pressuring the government to declare these lands (and territories) “negotiable” at market prices.

The march constitutes a strong indictment against President Sanchez de Lozada’s administration regarding the environment, biodiversity, and land and territorial management. Recent statistics published in Bolivia by LIDEMA (Environmental Defense League), demonstrate that the rate of deforestation has increased to unprecedented levels, as well as the percentage of national territory adversely affected by soil erosion. President Sanchez de Lozada, whose administration is plagued by inefficiency, has answered by menacing the marchers to postpone a debate over a law drafted by the National Agrarian Reform Institute, INRA—likely due to strong pressures from ranchers and agroindustries whose interest he strongly supports.

Indigenous peoples conflicts in Bolivia have been widespread since the

election of President Sanchez de Lozada in July 1993. His administration has seen the return of old forms of rural labor enslavement and debt peonage in cattle ranches and other estates in the Departments of Chuquisaca, Beni, Santa Cruz, and Tarija (Chaco). There have been no significant actions taken by his administration to eliminate such illegal practices, although many Indigenous nations, such as the Guaran, have publicly denounced it within the last four years. Practically all the well-known Indigenous peoples such as the Yuqui, Mosen, Chiquitano, Araona, Guaran, Chiman, and Weenhayek, have persistently endured physical abuse, enslavement, forced prostitution, debt-peonage, and the theft of their wages and lands.

Long marches are a recent strategy by rural inhabitants to press for their human rights in Bolivia. This 1996 march differs from recent ones because, rather than simply complain, it explains Indigenous peoples’ overdue demands. The Bolivian case, amidst those of the other Amazonian countries, is another example where governmental measures could stop the environmental collapse this area is currently undergoing. Indigenous peoples in the area have a long-term commitment to restore this forest, but not when under heavy pressures from non-sustainable forms of land management. Obviously, land tenure laws cannot be implemented without the input of peasant and Indigenous peoples’ organizations. Although the Sanchez de Lozada administration ran and enacted a Popular Participation Law, little has advanced in terms of participation, and most decisions in fact continue to exclude Indigenous peoples’ large representative confederations. 🐾