
Brazil: MST peasants occupy a shrimp farm

The problem of the loss of territories by peasants and indigenous peoples in favour of industrial projects has several aspects in Brazil and the Landless Peasant's Movement (MST) has been struggling to counteract this process.

We have reported on the successive occupations of land covered with vast monoculture eucalyptus plantations for pulp production – one of such occupations recently involved the women of Via Campesina/MST on the occasion of International Woman's Day.

Mangroves are also affected by depredatory projects. Shrimp farming is an extractive business that implies mangrove destruction. On 21 January this year in response to the situation and to protest against the slowness of the agrarian reform in the state, approximately 150 families associated with MST invaded the Qualibras shrimp farm located in Itapipoca, the coastal region of the State of Ceara.

With this occupation, MST was denouncing yet another act of violence by agro-business in the country: that of the Qualibras group destroying the mangroves in the region. According to Brazilian law this is a serious environmental crime because of the importance of mangroves, among other things, in the marine food chain. The Brazilian Terramar Institute denounced that the shrimp farms are violating Ceara laws as they are building nurseries in permanent protection areas. "An assessment made by the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA) found that 75 percent of the shrimp farms in Ceara are located in permanent preservation areas, violating the state laws."

In the mangroves big business finds great profitability thanks to low production costs, an abundant and close water supply and tide movements that help to keep down the cost of pumping water into the tanks.

In spite of the environmental importance of mangroves and of the legislation, shrimp farming companies continue to expand their business: between 2003 and 2004, the area of shrimp farms in Brazil rose from 14,824 to 16,598 hectares with a total of close on 1,000 farms throughout the country, compared to the 20 that existed in the eighties.

While this agro-business advances over the mangroves in the northeast of the country, the workers are getting organized. The families that took part in the occupation are camping in the coastal region of the state, struggling to be given land and granted deeds. There are a total of 1,700 families spread out in 25 camps, and many of them have been waiting for over five years for the promised agrarian reform. In 2006, the goal of the National Institute for Settlement and Agrarian Reform (INCRA) was to settle 2,000 families in the State, but only 206 have received lands. The indigenous group "Tremembes" also took part in the occupation, demanding demarcation of lands in the indigenous zone of Buritis in Itapipoca.

Gunmen hired by the company surrounded the camp on the night of 23 January, in an attempt to intimidate the men, women and children. Finally and to avoid a conflict placing the safety of their

families at risk, the landless peasants abandoned the occupation the following morning.

"We left with the intention of returning again in the event that INCRA does not definitively resolve the problems of the agrarian reform," affirmed a representative of the landless movement.

Article based on information from: "Brasil: MST ocupa fazenda devastadora de mangues no Ceará", Igor Felipe Santos, <http://www.biodiversidadla.org/content/view/full/29831>; "MST ocupa fazenda de criação de camarão", Carlos Henrique Camelo, OPovo online, <http://www.opovo.com.br/opovo/ceara/664429.html>; "MST sai de fazenda com ameaças de jagunços no Ceará", CUT, <http://www.cut.org.br/publicue/cgi/cgilua.exe/sys/start.htm?infoid=7314&sid=22>