

March 2012

Thousands from the International Community Support Peasants Marching in Guatemala

On Tuesday, an estimated 10,000 people marched into Guatemala's capital city. Many had trekked 120 miles from the town of Coban over nine days to draw attention to the plight of the rural and indigenous majority of the Guatemalan population. Their ranks swelled as they neared their destination and the peasants were joined by high school and university students, artists, musicians, unions, human rights activists, and women's rights groups.

Their demands of the Guatemalan Government focused on threats to land and livelihood faced by rural communities and included an end to evictions and unfounded criminal prosecutions against peasant communities, the forgiveness of agrarian debts to the government, access to land, and an end to mining and other large scale extractive industries in the region.

The timing of the march was chosen to coincide with the one year anniversary of the eviction of over 800 indigenous Q'echi' families in the Polochic Valley. Members of the communities have suffered malnutrition and violent attacks even after the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights requested in June of last year that the Government of Guatemala institute precautionary measures to prevent a humanitarian disaster.

As the protesters stood before the Guatemalan Congress, Daniel Pascual, Director of the Committee for Peasant Unity, read a letter signed by over 2,200 members of the international community urging President Pérez Molina to protect the communities of the Polochic Valley and provide them with land. Over the past few months, the Latin America Working Group had gathered the signatures. Then on Tuesday, the Guatemala Human Rights Commission/USA participated in the march and delivered the letter.

The exhausted marchers and their supporters stood in the city's central plaza until early Wednesday morning as leaders of the groups met with President Pérez Molina.

Participants observed with alarm that soldiers with machine guns trained on the crowd were stationed on top of nearby buildings.

Tensions further rose as nearly 100 police arrived and took up positions surrounding the park. While obviously intended as an act of control and intimidation against the peaceful gathering, no further steps were taken by the security forces.

At 2:30am on Wednesday morning, the leaders finally emerged from the meeting and were greeted with wild applause, whistles and cheers. The exuberant crowd lifted Daniel Pascual onto their shoulders and carried him to the stage, where he announced an eight-point agreement between the campesino movements and the government.

The document includes, among other commitments:

- The creation of a subsidy to alleviate the crushing debt suffered by family farmers and agrarian communities,
- Compliance with the Polochic precautionary measures and guaranteed access to land for at least 300 families during the first year,
- Protection for the Polochic communities from abuses by private security firms or irregular forces hired by the Chabil Utzaj sugar cane company,
- Support for a legislative proposal that would declare a moratorium on mining exploration and exploitation as well as hydroelectric megaprojects,
- The promise to address land conflicts in various regions throughout the country, and
- The removal of controversial military bases in areas marked by high social conflict.

Although the campesino farmers enthusiastically received the wide-ranging agreement, they were all too aware of the tremendous gap that

often exists between a signed accord and its actual implementation. The mood was one of guarded optimism. The event ended with the announcement of a follow-up meeting with the government on April 19 to evaluate its compliance with the signed accords.