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Environement

Land grabbing shows the urgent need to protect peasants' rights

- IV Online magazine - 2012 - IV446 - March 2012 -

Publication date: Wednesday 21 March 2012

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It's a red alert now. The government of Saudi Arabia currently owns 1.6 million hectares (ha) of land in Sudan and Indonesia. In Madagascar around 1.3 million ha were leased, bought or transferred to private corporations of South Korea.

The High Level Group of Experts of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) estimates that between 50 and 80 million ha of land in poor and developing countries have been negotiated, acquired or leased by international investors.

Large-scale land transactions are undermining food security, livelihoods and the environment of local populations. Along with a history-long discrimination against rural people, this wildly spreading global phenomenon has been the reason why there have been so many reports of human rights violations in rural areas recently, especially with regards to land rights.

While the United Nations Human rights Council is planning to discuss a declaration of the rights of peasants in the coming days, FIAN International together with La Via Campesina has organised a parallel event to the 19th session of the UN Human Rights Council on Thursday (8/3).

The event, entitled "Land Grabbing and the Urgent Need to Protect the Rights of Peasants", is acting as a warm up event for the current session of UN Human Rights Council. The objective is to lobby and connect parties who are supportive to the peasants' rights initiative. State members, Advisory Committee members, as well as experts and NGOs are invited to participate in the event.

"Land grabbing is clearly a gross violation of the rights of peasants," said Jean Ziegler, former special rapporteur on the right to food. "Most of these land grabs are not even for food production but for agrofuels, which are destroying our land, society, environment and our food sovereignty."

"We have to forbid land grabbing, if we want to protect our food system," concluded Mr. Ziegler, currently a UN Human Rights Council Advisory Committee member.

Henry Saraigh from La Via Campesina argued, "We have been saying this for 11 years already; land grabbing is not a new phenomenon, however it is getting worse." "If this trend continues, it will not only affect rural people in Southern countries, but it will also affect Northern countries, as land grabs will undermine the whole food system," the General Coordinator of La Via Campesina emphasized.

Angelica Navarro, Ambassador of Bolivia to the United Nations has an interesting perspective: "States have an obligation to protect the rights of rural people and peasants. These efforts in Bolivia can act like best practices and the initiative [on the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas] is complementary to our national efforts," she continued.

In this 19th session, the Advisory Committee will present final report on the advancement of the rights of peasants and other people working in rural areas (document A/HRC/19/75).

Besides the focus on the rights of the most vulnerable people working in rural areas, the study discusses the need to create a new special procedure to improve the promotion and protection of the rights of peasants and develop a new international human rights instrument for these rights. A declaration, based on the La Via Campesina Declaration of the Rights of Peasants Women and Men is attached to the study and could serve as a model.

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"The inequalities in land tenure as well as for other productive resources, discrimination against rural women peasants, the increase in hunger and malnutrition, and the difficulties in meeting the Millennium Development Goals are all very good reasons why we need a breakthrough in dealing with the food situation," said Jean Feyder, Ambassador of Luxembourg. The recommendations in the final study are meant to serve this objective; business as usual definitely will not solve the problem.

"Food is not a commodity, food has cultural and social dimensions too," Ana Maria Suarez Franco from FIAN International said. "Therefore, our food, our culture, and our social cohesion will be destroyed should the land grabbing phenomenon persist." Ana Maria further explained, "Food produced by peasants is as important as peace and security in the world." "Peasants and other rural people are now claiming their rights and offer real alternatives to improve the food system and human rights mechanisms. It is about time for the international community to respond to this," she concluded.

The final study will be discussed with states on March 13 and 14 on item 5 in the 19th session of UN Human Rights Council.

Geneva, 11 March 2012