In October, I visited rural communities in two Paraguayan departments, Alto Paraná and San Pedro, to photograph the social conflicts generated by industrial soy production. Slightly smaller than California, Paraguay is the world’s fastest-growing producer of soybeans and the fourth-largest soy exporter in the world. In 2007, soy covered 6.2 million acres of the country, and the area devoted to the crop was expected to increase to 6.5 million acres by the end of 2008.¹ This exponential increase is a result of the rising demand for meat and cattle feed in China, as well as the booming agro-fuel industry in Europe. Industrial soy serves these markets.

The soy boom has been disastrous for small farmers, who, after living for years on government-allotted forestland, have begun to be uprooted. In the last decade, the Paraguayan government has given away or illegally sold this public land to political friends in the soybean business, pushing the peasants out. Today, about 77% of Paraguayan land is owned by 1% of the population.² Unlike many other Latin Americans, most Paraguayans live in rural areas and are farmers by trade. But that is changing: Since the first soy boom in 1990, almost 100,000 small-scale farmers have been forced to migrate to urban slums; about 9,000 rural families are evicted by soy production each year.³
Brothers Ángel and Pedro Ramírez stand on the plot where their family’s home once stood, now the site of a transgenic soy field, in the town of Lote 8, in the Minga Porá district of Alto Paraná. They, like many of their neighbors, sold their land once crop fumigation in the area began. “It’s either leave, or stay and die,” says Ángel. Lote 8, once a town of several hundred, is virtually gone today, with almost all of its territory given over to soy plantations.

Chemically treated transgenic soybeans are marked with pink dye before planting, to distinguish them as toxic and inedible. Eighty-five percent of the soy produced in Paraguay is genetically modified and unsuitable for human consumption.  

⇒ Online feature: For a full-color version of this photo essay, visit nacla.org/soyparaguay.
Miguela Céspedes Bogado, 15, was born in the village of San Isidro, Alto Paraná, without legs. She has a partial foot extending directly from her right thigh, and two fingers are missing from her right hand. Her father used to use a backpack kit to apply pesticides and herbicides to his fields for his family’s own consumption, but stopped doing so about eight years ago. San Isidro, a small community composed of 100 or so houses clustered around one single road, is surrounded by transgenic soy plantations on all sides, at a higher elevation than the community itself. Cancer rates are high in the area; miscarriages are common, and several children have been born with birth defects.

Due to a dangerous combination of widespread corruption among local authorities, porous borders, and lax enforcement of environmental laws, soy cultivation dumps more than 6 million gallons of pesticides and herbicides into the Paraguayan soil every year, including several that are classified by the World Health Organization as extremely hazardous, like 2,4-D, Gramoxone, Paraquat, Metamidofos, and Endosulfan. About 90% of the soy produced in Paraguay is transgenic Roundup Ready, a variety engineered by the St. Louis–based Monsanto Company to be resistant to its patented herbicide. Fields of RR soy are indiscriminately fumigated with the herbicide, which kills everything in its path except the soy.
One of Cargill’s 41 industrial facilities in Paraguay. The company, which earns more than $3 billion a year and dominates the world grain market, first began operation in Paraguay in 1978, at the height of the military dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner. Today it leads the Paraguayan agribusiness sector with the commercialization of more than 1.3 million tons of soy, wheat, and corn each year. This amounts to about a third of Paraguay’s annual harvest.
In San Marcos, a village in San Pedro, farmers were detained by national police after a court-ordered eviction of a landless settlement on the property of a soybean producer. Two-hundred families living in the surrounding area began the occupation in June 2008, arguing that the owner does not have a title to the property. Paraguayan peasant resistance to agro-industry has been the strongest in San Pedro.

Since the soy boom gathered steam during the last five years, a wave of peasant land takeovers has swept the nation. Land invasions generally have an ecological as well as a social character: Landless farmers not only demand land to work, but also protest the soy producers’ widespread deforestation and use of agrochemicals.

Although locals frequently complain of headaches, nausea, skin rashes, vision problems, and respiratory infections—as well as a suspiciously high incidence of birth defects in soy-producing regions—such reports seldom make it into Paraguay’s news media. In the days following a fumigation, it is also common for farmers’ chickens to die, and for the cows to abort their calves and their milk to dry up. The non-soy crops that farmers produce for their own consumption also perish.
An armed private security guard patrols the 30,000-acre property of the multinational soybean producer Agropeco. A landless farmers’ settlement is seen in the distance, right outside the property’s edge. Landless farmers claim that Agropeco occupies more property than it owns. A public corporation comprising U.S., Italian, and Paraguayan owners, Agropeco formed in 1983. It sells most of its production to Cargill and Archer Daniels Midland for export.

Land reform is the single most important political issue in Paraguay, and the biggest challenge for the country’s president, Fernando Lugo. His supporters plan a national survey to determine who owns what land—a project that could take at least two years. But landless farmers groups aren’t waiting. In recent months, land invasions in Paraguay have gotten increasingly violent, and it has become common for large landowners to hire teams of private armed guards to stand watch over their crops 24 hours a day. In October, the Paraguayan government prohibited the sale of land to foreign citizens, after the killing of a peasant activist, the first since Lugo assumed the presidency in mid-August, highlighting the urgent and still unresolved issue of how the government intends to carry out land reform.
In Lote 8, 150 landless families occupy the edge of a 700-acre property belonging to a Brazilian transgenic soy producer, hoping the land will be granted to them if the owner cannot present a title. The day after this photograph was taken, a local district attorney ordered the families evicted, just in time for the planting season.


12. Adjusting for income increases, CEPAL estimates that the figure will actually be 10 million, but this estimate may not have properly taken into account the overproduction glut that helped bring down food prices in 2008. United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, “Food Price Hikes May Increase Poverty and Indigence by Over Ten Million People in Latin America and the Caribbean,” *CEPAL News* 26, no. 4 (April 2008): 1.


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2. La Vía Campesina and Food First Information and Action Network (FIAN), “La reforma agraria en Paraguay. Informe de la misión investigadora sobre el estado de la realización de la reforma agraria en tanto obligación de derechos humanos” (Heidelberg, Germany, 2007).


6. Altervida, “Transgénicos.”

MALA: The Fun House Mirror


2. The Hill publication *Politico* ran an article by Clint Rice, reporter for American University newspaper *The Eagle*. Opinion pieces by journalist Amy Goodman and CEPR co-director Mark Weisbrot also described Morales’s visit, but these were not news articles.


