

## Stop Land Grabbing in Taiwan!

### International Joint Statement Organized by the Taiwan Rural Front (TRF)

#### **Background**

The Taiwan society was astonished to see a horrible story unfolding at Dapu (大埔), a rural community of Miaoli County (苗栗縣) in early June last year. The local government abused its power of land expropriation or eminent domain in order to establish a new satellite community next to an industrial park. Forty-three families who resisted were expelled by policemen from their homes and farmlands in a dawn raid. Rice in paddy fields nearly ready for harvest was totally destroyed by bulldozers. Even the topsoil was dug up and discarded to prevent any re-cultivation of the land. The event seriously violated legal protections of human rights found in the Constitution as well as international law.

At approximately the same time, a second terrible case occurred at Siangsihliao (相思寮) in Changhua County (彰化縣). Twenty-one elderly farmers and their families were forced to leave their homes and farmlands because the government planned to construct an industrial park on their land. The government's forcible land expropriation came like a bolt of lightning. The elderly farmers found themselves at a loss, not knowing what would become of them. The farmers went to Taipei several times to petition authorities — the Cabinet, the legislature and the president — to no avail. What they wished to convey rang more than true: they said the government was worse than robbers, because robbers would at least leave them with land on which to grow food.

The above are only two cases that received a measure of media attention. There are many other lesser-known cases of problematic land expropriation, accomplished or in process, in Taiwan in recent years, for example, at Erchongpu (二重埔) and Puyu (璞玉) in Hsinchu County (新竹縣), Wanpao (灣寶) in Miaoli County, Kungliao (貢寮) in Xinbei City (formerly called Taipei County). With the assistance of the Taiwan Rural Front (TRF), a social movement organization, hundreds of farmers from all of these areas as well as several thousand sympathetic citizens staged a sit-in and sleep-in for 'land justice' on July 17 and 18, 2010 in front of the Presidential Office in Taipei. They protested against the expropriation of their farmland, their very means of livelihood, without due process or consent. At first light on July 18, they even "planted" an acre of rice seedlings to remind to government that land and labor should not be treated as mere commodities. They asked the

government to cease such land expropriation until the relevant law is appropriately rectified.

As the culmination of many previous protest actions, the sit-in/sleep-in caught the attention of the media and hence of the government. Premier Wu Den-yih (吳敦義) finally promised last July to make special arrangements for the two best-known cases (Dapu and Siangsihliao), including allowing farmers to keep their houses on the site while the government indentified other plots of land to compensate for the farmland seized by the government. With fading media attention, however, the promise has turned into foot-dragging. The expropriation orders have yet to be revoked, which means that the evictions can still proceed.

In the past year, we have seen little change in land-grabbing policies and schemes, and a TRF-sponsored draft revision of the Land Expropriation Act (土地徵收條例) did not even get past the Procedure Committee of the national legislature. The farmers and the TRF have thus decided to return to the Presidential Office on July 16 and 17 this year!

### **Joint Statement**

Therefore, we, the undersigned, make the following statement:

1. We wish to remind the Taiwan government that land expropriation is a very serious state measure. Because of the grave moral, political, and material consequences involved, more advanced democracies are reluctant to use it, and do so only as a last resort. In Taiwan, however, land expropriation has long been almost habitually abused. Underutilized science and industrial parks can be seen practically everywhere in Taiwan, yet land expropriation schemes continue to multiply. They are frequently rolled out in the name of promoting economic growth, since the government sees land only as a factor of production, whose only value lies in its contribution to GDP. This is a tremendous irony for Taiwan, a country that claims to be a constitutional democracy that guarantees citizens the right to private property. And there is even a bigger irony: in December 2009, with great fanfare, the government ratified the International Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and on Civil and Political Rights and set itself a two-year deadline to bring all laws into compliance.
2. We wish to point out, further, that the initiation of land expropriation must be predicated on the public interest, and the fulfillment of the public interest

requires the most stringent administrative procedures and full participation of local residents to reach the widest possible consensus. However, the Land Expropriation Act in Taiwan is seriously flawed, turning the “public interest” into a fictitious pretext and a convenient tool for those with power — both central and local governments, in association with corporate interests — to deprive more vulnerable citizens of their right to means of livelihood, work, and subsistence. Current legislation gives local residents and landowners no effective right to oppose expropriation at all. Despite legal requirements for public hearings, price negotiation between the government and landowners as well as reviews by “planning committees,” these safeguards have remained paper ones. The Land Expropriation Act is in dire need of a complete overhaul and recasting.

3. We wish to emphasize that, aside from being unjust, the expropriation of family farms is shortsighted and suicidal in more senses than one. Take food production. Taiwan has an appallingly low food self-sufficiency rate (30%), far lower than China (95%), Germany (99%), France (122%), the U.S. (128%), and even Japan (40%). Yet the government is blissfully unprepared for the global food crisis that has worried the world since 2008. The unthinking presumption is “we can always buy and import,” and thus the self-conflicting policies which uproot rice farmers in Taiwan while at the same time considering leasing land in Africa or Central America to produce rice 'offshore' for Taiwan's food security. But what if the oil crisis which is bound to come makes global and even domestic long-distance bulk trade hard to sustain due to prohibitive transport costs? Or the global food price so skyrockets that only the rich can afford to buy? Or supply becomes so short that one cannot buy even if one had the money? Will not intensive small-holder farming, which is known to be more productive, more energy-efficient — and more environmentally sustainable — then become the backbone of a necessary new agriculture? This, along with many related problems (such as global warming and climate change), has profound implications for Taiwan’s present and future, including national security and autonomy. Better late than never: we urge Taiwan’s government to think them through.

We cannot continue to accept the backward mode of national development that has held sway up to now in Taiwan and in many other countries. We call on the Taiwan government to stop land grabbing immediately!