

Seeds, land and water the ides of March

SILVIA RIBEIRO

During the month of March 2006, southern Brazil, the cradle of many strong social movements, was the scene of a confrontation between peasant movements and transnational companies against a backdrop of a series of UN meetings. Between the 5 and 31 March Brazil hosted the United Nations Conference on Agrarian Reform and Local Development, the Third Meeting of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety and the Eighth Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity. At the same time, the Fourth World Water Forum met in Mexico. At stake: who controls seeds, land and water – all indispensable for peasants' livelihoods.

Without asking permission, the 'wretched of the earth', through the voices of thousands of Brazilian peasants, landless rural workers, people displaced

by dams, those affected by timber and GM soybean plantations took to the stage at UN conferences held in Porto Alegre and Curitiba. At the same time tens of thousands marched in Mexico to call for their right to access to water and stop its privatisation. With the calm and the strength of the rightful, armed with seeds, maize, banners and songs, these people astounded the diplomats of the world, reminding them that there is a real world out there beyond the negotiating tables, and enraged the directors and lobbyists of transnational corporations.

During the final demonstration called by Via Campesina on 31 March outside the Curitiba convention centre, over 5,000 peasants and members of the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) held up a huge sign that summarised what is at stake: "Nature and biodiversity belong to the people, not to governments or transnationals."



In Brazil, Via Campesina staked out the battle field from the beginning. On 8 March 2006, women from the movement occupied a laboratory and a eucalyptus cloning nursery run by the Aracruz company, to protest against the “green desert” and the aggressive tactics used against indigenous peoples and peasants (see also the article “Plantations, GM Trees and Indigenous Rights” in this issue of *Seedling*). Next they marched and closed off access to the Porto Alegre Agrarian Reform conference for four hours. Two days later, they had their declaration from the parallel Land, Territory and Dignity forum included as an official document at the UN Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development.

Just a week later, the Biosafety Protocol meeting began with demonstrations and MST and Via Campesina took over a farm where Syngenta was illegally planting GM maize and soybeans, in the Iguacu National Park buffer zone, home to the famous waterfalls of the same name. They are still occupying the farm.


The following week, in a resounding victory for international civil society, the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) maintained and reaffirmed its moratorium on the use of the GM Terminator technology to make sterile seeds. The moratorium has held within the CBD since 2000, but it had been seriously threatened by the efforts of biotech companies, who two months earlier had succeeded in passing a resolution to undermine it, at a CBD preparatory meeting in Granada, Spain.

Officials of transnational corporations had landed in Brazil with smiles on their faces, and global directors from Monsanto, Syngenta and Delta & Pine shamelessly strutted the halls as leaders in the GM seed market and holders of the majority of the world’s Terminator patents. Their victory in Granada and their feeling of total sway over government bureaucrats – whom they are used to “instructing” through bribes or other means – had left them riding high.

They received a slap in the face. The rainbow of daily protests by Via Campesina at the entrance to the convention centre, the simultaneous events in Brazil and other countries by hundreds of civil society organisations coordinated by the international Ban Terminator Campaign, the speeches by youth and indigenous leaders (including delegates sent by the Huichol people of Mexico and the Guambiano people of Colombia specifically to speak on the issue), the parallel side-events held by the Brazilian NGO and Social Movements’ Forum, all together

finally overturned the texts agreed in Granada, to the despair of the transnational corporations and the countries committed to ending the moratorium, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. Mexico’s delegates worked to the last moment to convince other governments to lift the moratorium, consistent with their behaviour at the other March gatherings, where they invariably took on the defence of the transnational corporations.

The strongest and most symbolic moment during the entire CBD meeting was the entry of the Via Campesina women into the plenary hall. Wearing Via Campesina’s green scarves and carrying candles, they raised dozens of signs in several languages in front of the official delegations, demanding a ban on Terminator technology. The chairman announced that this “statement” would also be taken into account, and to the great frustration of a Delta & Pine employee who had called in security guards to intervene, the vast majority of the plenary session rose and applauded.

Maintaining the Terminator moratorium is an important achievement, relevant to millions of peasant and indigenous farmers, and enabling us all – rather than the transnationals – to choose what we eat. But, perhaps the most important message, not written in papers, yet irrefutable, was that the ‘wretched of the earth’ do not accept their damnation and reject their oppressors and those who use national and international laws to legitimate the privileges of the powerful. 



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See also Silvia Ribeiro’s article on page 13.

