

Guatemalan Priest Demands Land for the People

Tired of seeing the peasants die of hunger, Father Girón is now at the head of an important peasant movement.

A dynamic outspoken priest has become the leader of Guatemala's most numerous opposition group. He is Father Andrés Girón of the National Peasant Association (ANC), and the struggle is: LAND FOR THE PEOPLE.

On the last Sunday of November 1986, Father Girón, together with some 300 peasant farmers and their families, occupied the coffee plantation "Montellano" in the department of Chimaltenango. The occupation has been labelled "invasion" and "take-over", but it is not strictly either, as *Padre* Girón and the ANC plan to pay one million quetzales (some \$400,000) for the 1,500 acre plantation.

"I believe there must be agrarian reform in Guatemala. And I know there will be, sooner or later, either peacefully or violently. We have tried to get land through legal means and I didn't 'take' the plantation; I talked with President (Vinicio) Cerezo about this seven months ago, and he promised me land.

"We went in last Sunday because we had an agreement, and the people were waiting for the President to come and hand over the land, but no one from the government

a state of extreme poverty and hunger. That's why I fight for land reform, that's why I took the finca.

"The President has promised us land, and even if he wasn't serious about it, I'm going to make him serious. I'm ready for anything, because I believe in what I'm doing. I don't care if they fire me from my parish, I don't care if they kill me, I'm ready.

believes them anymore."

He showed us a copy of a speech made in 1974 by René de León Schlotter, currently Minister of Development, where he proposed a re-distribution of land in Guatemala, accompanied by technical training and assistance for the peasant farmers. As minister in Vinicio Cerezo's government, Mr. Schlotter has not put any land reform programs into action, but he has inaugurated model villages, for example last February in the northern Guatemalan department of El Quiché.

Father Girón says that in Guatemala, 70% of the arable land is in the hands of 1.2% of the population. He says that fair land distribution should not be a political issue, although it is necessarily an economic issue. Demands for land reform in Guatemala last year included organization in the departments of San Marcos and Alta Verapaz, and a march of some 16,000 peasants in April, led by Father Girón, from Escuintla on the south coast, to the capital.

Father Andrés Girón is a 42 year old priest who received his tertiary education in the United States. He told us that he wrote his thesis in Political Science, arguing that revolution was the only solution for Latin America. Later, he said, he worked with Martin Luther King, and learned that there was another way to achieve change, peacefully.

Currently, he is parish priest in two neighboring parishes, Nueva Concepción and Tiquisate, in the department of Escuintla located along southern Guatemala's Pacific Coast.

The coffee plantation of Montellano is in the neighboring department of Chimaltenango, near the town of San Pedro Yepocapa. The take-over of the plantation met with opposition from some local people, including some who said they were landless peasants who needed land



Preaching on the need to purchase land

photo by J.C. Cambranes

showed up. So we moved in anyway, and legally we are in the right, the papers are drawn up and everything, and I hope to sign them soon.

"I am not seeking political power. I am sick and tired of people dying of hunger at my desk. I invite you to come and live with me for a month and you'll see that I'm telling the truth. The peasants live in

I'm very convinced we must have a new structure of government: the political and economic structure of Guatemala is in the hands of the rich, in the hands of a very few people. We are trying to change that."

According to Father Girón, politicians in Guatemala have been promising land reform for years, "but nobody

latin american issues

too, and had a right to that plantation. Local politicians also protested: the mayor of Yepocapa, Eulogio Coz Temal, reportedly told the press that he and local peasants were "indignant" that the plantation had been occupied by Father Girón and his group because they were outsiders.

The 1,500 peasants —some 300 families— who will work the plantation, are from the departments of Sololá and Totonicapán. They have belonged to the National Peasant Association since its beginning, and according to Father Girón, have been chosen from the best elements of the ANC, so that the farming project succeeds. "So that people won't say: 'the peasants are imbeciles'. We want this project to succeed."

"If the plantation had been handed over two months earlier, the coffee crop would have been ours. Instead, the coffee was lost. We were able to pick a little that was still good. But we lost a lot of money that the peasants urgently need at this moment."

The immediate problems for the peasants in Montellano are those of survival: food, water, housing, and the upgrading of the infrastructure of the plantation, which has been abandoned during the past four years, since it became property of BANDESA (the government-owned agricultural development bank.)

According to journalist Robert Rosenhouse, in the bulletin THIS WEEK: CENTRAL AMERICA & PANAMA of December 8, 1986, Montellano was once part of a larger property. The part now taken over by Father Girón and the ANC was used as collateral for a large loan from a private bank. Rosenhouse argues that the loan was "corrupt credit", as the loan received was worth much more than the property, and was never repaid, due to collusion between the borrowers and the lenders.

The news agency ACAN-EFE reports that there are some 16 *fincas* (farms or plantations) mortgaged by banks in Guatemala, and Father Girón certainly has his eyes on some of them as future farms for the landless peasants.

Another aspect of the agrarian reform envisaged by Father Girón is collective ownership and communal

work processes; he is against the private ownership of parcels that become increasingly small with time and inheritances. The plantation Montellano will be a pilot project for these land reform plans.

The news agency ACAN-EFE also reports the following figures from the Guatemalan Statistics Institute:

547,547 small land-holders
49,137 medium sized holdings
13,365 large holdings or *latifundios*
110,501 landless peasants.

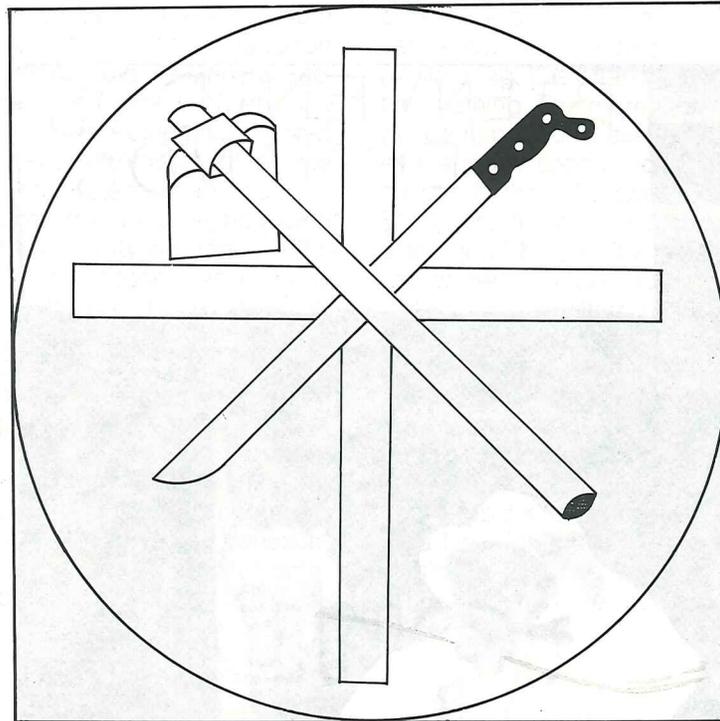
Furthermore, those 13,365 *latifundios* encompass 65.4% of Guatemala's arable land.

However, THIS WEEK: CENTRAL AMERICA & PANAMA reports a study by the Agency for International Development (AID) in 1980, which claims there are 420,000 landless peasants in Guatemala. This figure is probably correct —Father Girón says there are some 100,000 peasants just in the ANC.

I asked Father Girón if he, as a member of the Church, was not afraid of being manipulated in a political game between land-owners, government and the press.

"I'm already in it," he replied, "and I can't afford it, I'm going to fight political manipulation with the truth, and nothing but the truth."

"The Church is political too," he said. "Just look at the



The symbol of Father Girón's land-movement



Father Girón and his peasant disciples

Photo by J.C. Cambranes

Pope: he is asking the Brazilian government for land reform, that was one of the main points of his visit to Brazil.”

“Here in Guatemala, the Church has not backed me up. The Bishops have written some beautiful letters about social justice, but they don’t act.”

Monseñor Gerardi, head of the Episcopal Conference of Guatemala, told me that he personally supports Father Girón (“something must be done”), but that neither he nor the Church gives official support to the priest’s agrarian reform projects. “I am not called to resolve agrarian problems,” said *Monseñor* Gerardi. He added that he thought Father Girón should be careful: “It does not seem right to me that the government use Father Girón to implement its agrarian reform programs.”

But, up to the present, the government of Vinicio Cerezo has announced no such program, nor has the democratically elected Congress passed any laws on the subject.

Father Girón is critical of the new democracy in Guatemala: “If the President’s not serious, I’m going to make him serious.” “The government has done nothing in the way of new schools or new hospitals—but it has opened new model villages, which I think are just concentration camps.”

“Even though Cerezo won the election with a big majority, he does not have the power. Unfortunately, I don’t think the President rules. The rulers remain the same: private industry and the military.” Another problem for us, the priest continues, is financing: “the banks of the system are the big landowners, and it is almost impossible for us to get a piece of land from them. Guatemala still lives in a feudal system.”★