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Paraguay: Another peasant farmer leader killed to silence campaigns for land

The recent killing of peasant farmer leader Felipe Pablo Benítez is yet another deplorable act of an intimidation campaign aimed at preventing peasant farmers from legitimately protesting their rights to secure land, Amnesty International said today.

“Death threats, intimidation and killings of peasant farmers campaigning for land rights are registered throughout the country. If peasant farmers are going to be secured the right to legitimately campaign for these rights, the government must take immediate action to investigate this latest killing and bring those responsible to justice,” the organization said.

Felipe Pablo Benítez was vice-president of the *Comisión Vecinal de Puente Kué*, Puente Kué Association. Over the past two months members of the Association have been camped in the entrance hall to the Metropolitan Cathedral in Asunción as part of their campaign to secure in their favour the expropriation of land belonging to the cattle-ranching firm Caapucumí.

On 11 July Felipe Pablo Benítez was reportedly shot at repeatedly by unidentified gunmen in the 3 de Mayo community, municipality of Yuty, department of Caazapá. He died the following day. According to information received by Amnesty International Felipe Pablo Benítez had received death threats.

“It is essential that the Paraguayan Government guarantees the safety of other members of the Puente Kué Commission to ensure that they may continue their legitimate campaigning activities -- only then will it be possible to put an end to the intimidation land rights campaigners face,” Amnesty International said.

Background Information

Human rights violations during land disputes are again increasing as landless peasant farmers have occupied large tracts of under-developed or unused property owned by powerful large landowners. Armed civilians hired by landowners have been responsible for these abuses. Such abuses appear to have the acquiescence of the security forces.

Violent expulsions and the ill-treatment or torture of landless peasant farmers detained during land disputes have escalated in recent years. On 7 May, members of the San Pedro Department Police reportedly brutally beat peasant farmers occupying land in the Costa Nueva settlement in the community of 25 de Diciembre during an eviction operation.

At least four peasant farmer leaders have been killed in Paraguay in the last 12 months by landowning interests operating with the acquiescence of the security forces. Amnesty International is concerned by the failure of the authorities to bring those responsible to justice.
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