

Bolivia Plans to Redistribute Idle Farmland

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SAO PAULO, Brazil, May 17 -- Two weeks after claiming control of the natural gas and oil under Bolivia's soil, the government of President Evo Morales has turned its attention above ground, launching a plan to redistribute parcels of idle farmland to the poor.

Officials announced Tuesday that they would start by redistributing about 12 million acres of state-owned land to indigenous rural workers. But officials say that amount could eventually triple if more privately held lands are declared unproductive, a prospect that some fear could inflame the divisions between rich and poor that have contributed to conflicts between Bolivia's east and west.

Morales sailed to victory in elections in December denouncing the inequality of Bolivia's economy, saying that money and resources flow downhill from the western highlands, populated largely by indigenous groups, and settle in the relatively wealthy lowlands of the east. Morales described his energy nationalization plan as an attempt to distribute income from national resources more equitably; the land reform plan is a continuation of that strategy.

Officials do not plan to confiscate property from "anyone who has legally obtained the land and who works on it every day and makes it productive," Hugo Salvatierra, the minister for rural development, told reporters Tuesday.

The land reform issue is even more politically volatile in Bolivia than energy nationalization, which has riled some foreign investors in the country's energy sector but was widely expected among Bolivians. Agrarian reform is a drama that will play out on large swaths of the countryside and could directly affect more than one-fourth of the population.

Salvatierra said as many as 35 million acres could be redistributed among about 2.5 million people in the next five years. That translates to about 13 percent of the country's land being given to about 28 percent of its people. Most of the recipients would be the indigenous peasants who are the majority of Bolivia's population, particularly in the western highlands. "They are the ones who most need the land and who have the least," Sergio Almaraz, vice minister for rural development, said in a statement.

Although officials emphasized that land in all parts of the country would be redistributed, most of the land would be in the east, where the population includes more Bolivians of European descent. Much of it will likely be in Santa Cruz, the wealthy district where the country's energy and agricultural sectors are centered.

Government officials have said that many properties in the region were acquired illegally or given free to wealthy landowners by the dictatorial governments of the 1970s. If current owners of those lands do not pay the government to legalize their deeds, the state would inherit the properties for redistribution.

It is also the area of the most concentrated opposition to Morales, and business and political leaders there have often called for more autonomy from government decision-

making. While Morales's supporters argue that the residents of Santa Cruz get an unfair share of the country's wealth, many residents of the eastern province contend that their work produces most of the country's revenue.

Mauricio Roca, president of the Eastern Agricultural Chamber in Santa Cruz, said he was concerned that widespread migration of land recipients from the west could result in social disorder and overwhelm the resources of the eastern provinces. He said the government instead should invest in developing productive sectors in the west to help rural workers there better their lives.

"President Morales always has visualized the eastern productive sector of Bolivia as an enemy because it has a vision of the country that is different from his," Roca said during an interview Monday in Santa Cruz. "We believe in private enterprise and free markets. We believe poverty cannot be eliminated by discourse, but poverty can be eliminated with production."

Government officials discounted Roca's worries, saying that priority for the lands would be given to local recipients. There are no plans to move recipients to other parts of the country, they said.

Efforts at land reform in Bolivia date to 1953 and as recently as 1996. But current government officials said those programs were inefficient and did little to help indigenous people.

Bolivia's efforts to reclaim idle land follow similar moves by Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez, one of Morales's closest allies. Chavez's government has taken control of dozens of properties that did not have proper ownership records or were underutilized.