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June 4, 1963

Agrarian Reform Meets Resistance in Formosa, Goias

Brasilia (5)

On Saturday, May 19, 1963 two officials of SUPRA (Superentendencia de Reforma Agraria), were proceeding to Formosa for the purpose of holding a public meeting to explain the Agrarian Reform Program. The two men, both reportedly armed, were stopped on the road outside of Formosa by a group of about 150 cattle ranchers who refused to allow them to enter town. The ranchers' argument was that they did not want "strangers" and "Brizola's boys" coming into town stirring up the populace. The SUPRA officials retorted that they only wished to explain the new land distribution proposals.

Finally, after about an hour of discussion, the two SUPRA agents about faced and departed for Brasilia. On the scene sources report that contrary to newspaper reports that the SUPRA jeep was bullet riddled, only two shots were fired by the ranchers into the side of the road as the visitors left. (One person sympathetic to the ranchers states that the SUPRA men stopped down the road and put the holes in the jeep themselves.)

Upon their return to Brasilia the SUPRA agents immediately reported the incident to the Federal Police. Police cars were despatched to Formosa but they did not make contact with the ranchers. As a result of this incident SUPRA has asked for

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Federal forces to guarantee the rural meetings they are holding throughout Goias.

The reporting officer discussed this incident with an American citizen resident of Formosa, Warren Stoetzi, who has a large ranch as well as a slaughter house in town. Stoetzi said that many of the cattlemen involved in the incident own only about 80 - 100 hectares (200 - 250 acres, relatively small farms for Goias). Stoetzi is fervently pro-rancher but he has not been actively involved in this incident. He stated that the road block was set up on the understanding that Leonel Brizola was himself coming to speak to the campesinos and that the ranchers were hoping to kill Brizola when he arrived. He indicated the ranchers had about a dozen hand-grenades in their possession and that they were in the right mood to commit murder. He also said the ranchers do not intend to calm down after this incident. To the contrary, they have signed an agreement under which they will act jointly in using force to remove anyone illegally (by their own definition) on their lands.

Ten days after this incident, Formosa's mayor and the President of the City Council called on the President of SUPRA to apologize for the acts of a "small part of Formosa's population". At the same time SUPRA was asked to "exercise caution in programing activities of the type which caused this incident".

Pertinent to the Formosa incident only in that it takes the same line, was a report from Carlos de Freitas Borges, a well-known lawyer in Goiania who is active in state PSD circles, that the landowners south of Goiania have banded together to evict all illegal residents. Borges indicated that the Formosa incident had served as the example for his group, particularly since the Formosa cattlemen had gotten away with it.

Comment : Feelings in this area are running strongly against reforma agraria, at least among land owners. There has been a wave of land seizures by campesinos in Goias and the land owners feel this is illegal and unnecessary since there is ample free land for all who want it. It seems clear that agrarian reform is meeting with substantial resistance in Goias. How well the landowners can resist government action based on any law to be enacted remains to be seen.

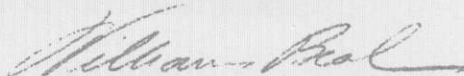
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On the basis of the facts uncovered, and in the light of the strong feeling of the ranchers, the reporting officer believes that the Formosa incident might well have resulted in the assassination of Brizola, had he been with the SUPRA agents at the time they were stopped.

For the Ambassador:



Williams Beal
First Secretary of Embassy

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