

TWENTY-ONE years of military dictatorship ended in January when 130 million Brazilians acquired a new civilian government. Its head was to have been Tancredo Neves, a 75-year-old "centre-right" politician who won a landslide victory in the electoral college on promises of sweeping reforms.

Neves never took office. On the even of his scheduled inauguration as president he was taken ill and, despite intensive hospital treatment, he died on April 21.

Neves' programme, which fell into the lap of his successor – his former vice-president José Sarney – included measures which the millions of poor in Brazil were hoping would improve their lot.

For poverty in Brazil is widespread. Some 40% of the population live below the lowest poverty line. And even those in work do not automatically escape privation; at least half the wage-earners – about 26m people – have incomes too small to support a family in its basic living needs.

Brazil's poverty shows itself most starkly in the shanty-towns of the big cities, those dejected encampments of cardboard and petrol drums where life is grim, disease-ridden – and short.

And it shows itself in the squalor and hunger of the countryside, in the sub-human conditions of the ill-paid plantation workers and in the plight of the landless peasants who give their labour free to estate owners in exchange for the use of a few pathetic square metres of land on which to grow their meagre ration of food.

In Brazil, the gap between rich and poor is as wide as in any country of the Third World. According to the 1980 census, the wealthiest 1% of the population took 16.4% of the national income, while the poorest 60% took only slightly more – 18.4%.

POVERTY has been the great blot on Brazil's social landscape ever since the country's colonisation in the 16th century when the Portuguese crown doled out huge tracts of land to favoured colonisers whose descendants are the large and wealthy landowners – and the political bosses of today.

The vast majority of the original colonists – many of them slaves – were ignored when the land was parcelled out so that the society of the 1980s shows a harsh polarisation between the haves and the have-nots.

The vast gap between rich and poor is at its most grotesque in the

Neves' heirs of reforms

- Last year, Brazil recorded nearly 1,000 violent incidents and 180 deaths in the war over land. This year, the tension has escalated, and Bishop Alano Pena says: "Never have we seen this kind of violence".
- José Sarney, Brazil's first civilian president since 1964, wants to distribute 480m hectares of mostly private land to

7.1m peasants over 15 years. Will he succeed? Landowners are now marshalling their gunmen against the reforms.

● But has Brazil found the most effective plan for reducing unemployment and raising wages? This report reviews the level of poverty in a land-rich country which is scarred by a tenurial system that generates hunger.

By **BERT BROOKES**

notorious north-east, an area greater than that of Italy, Spain and Portugal combined where, according to Neves himself, malnutrition and infant mortality are well above the Brazilian average.

In this region, where 40% of the land is owned by 1% of landowners (leaving aside those who own no land at all) the standard of living of the people is as low as in any depressed area of the world.

The climate bears some part of the blame – the area is subject to regular drought – but it is the unjust pattern of land tenure which is primarily responsible. While millions scrape what food they can from microscopic fragments of land, large areas of the *latifundia* are held idle.

*The Guardian*¹ has reported that, in Brazil as a whole, over 10 million rural families have no land of their own whilst at least 1,000 million acres of land remain unused on private estates.

Against this background, Tancredo Neves' programme of economic and social change – which included measures of land reform – was eagerly awaited by the country's underdogs. This was especially so in the north-east, where land reform is seen as the basic essential, without which no improvement in social conditions is possible.

Plans for land reform have featured in the manifestos of many past Brazilian governments, but such is the power of the landowners that all have remained plans, gathering dust in the

government archives. To this day, Brazil has seen no land reform worthy of the name, despite the injustice and inhumanity of the present set-up.

DESPITE the untimely death of Tancredo Neves it seems that all hope of land reform has not been lost.

According to reports coming in from Brasilia, the Brazilian capital, the new government is doing its best

GAMBLES

LAND VALUES soared when new roads were forged into the western savannahs. Politicians and businessmen acquired vast estates for cattle, soyabeans or to hold the tracts vacant for speculative purposes.

Estates of more than 1,000 hectares each accounted for 47% of Brazil's land in 1967, rising to 58% last year. Now, 342 owners control 47.5m hectares while 2.5m peasants owned 5m hectares.

The number of landless labourers? The official figure is put at 10.6m last year. About 45% fertile land – about 400m acres – is not cultivated.

★ ★ ★

FOUR hundred thousand Brazilians settled just inside the Paraguay border – where land was relatively cheap – after losing their jobs through the mechanisation of Brazilian farms. They proved to be

give hopes on land

to implement the pledges of its former leader.

The Guardian reported in June that "seven million families are to be settled on land confiscated from the huge estates of the *latifundarios* (the landowners).

According to *The Times*² the plan is more modest; their correspondent reports that it involves the re-settlement of "almost one and a half million landless farm workers".

Whatever the scope of the plan, it threatens enough, apparently, to stir up violent opposition among the landowners. Already, some are denouncing it as "Marxist-Leninist-inspired, leading to class warfare".

There are signs that the violence that has been used by landowners in the past to oppose previous land-reform plans (with bands of hired gunmen being used to terrorise



● LAND REFORM was a key plank of the manifesto published by Tancredo Neves (above) which helped him to win the election. That programme is now being implemented by his successor, José Sarney, the owner of a 2,400-hectare farm.

peasants) will be employed again.

The government of José Sarney is clearly going to have a fight on its hands. The pity is that, however loudly the landowners may be shouting, it really is only a very limited measure. It will affect only a minority

of the landless farm and plantation workers.

The squatters of the city shantytowns will hardly know it is happening. It will add to the number of small landowners but the powers of the big estate-owners will be little eroded.

OVER SAVANNAH'S

FORTUNES

more efficient than Paraguayan farmers, and began to prosper. Now, however, the settlers are being hounded back across the Brazilian border by police. This has led to the creation of refugee camps, where the children — born in Paraguay, but not registered — are stateless.

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JOSÉ Pereira da Silva jumped for joy when he heard that the government was willing to appropriate unused land for distribution among landless labourers.

Jumping the legal gun, however, he grabbed 100 acres of land that belonged to a 10,500-acre property owned by a taxi driver who lived in a town 20 miles away.

The taxi driver was not amused.

He sent in his *pistoleiros*, who murdered José and eight other squatters. The police did not intervene.

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PRESIDENT Sarney has not helped his reformist cause with some politically inept decisions. One of these was his signature on a decree announcing plans to expropriate the entire metropolitan area of Londrina, (population 300,000) in an effort to find land for 137 peasant families who were squatting on an Indian reservation. Sarney had to rescind his decree after political protests.

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HIRED gunmen shot and killed Ezechiele Ramin, an Italian priest, who attempted to settle a land dispute in the eastern Amazon jungle in July.

A MUCH more beneficial degree of land reform would be achieved if, instead of trying to organise a physical transfer of land from one group of people to another, the government were to declare *all* the land of Brazil to be the property of *all* the people of Brazil, and to give effect to such a declaration by requiring all economic land-rent to be paid, not to the present private owners, but to the public treasury.

The liability to pay rent for all landholdings would quickly force the vast area of idle land into use. The price of all land would fall and the beneficial effects of this would be shared by all Brazilians, whether in town or country, industry or agriculture.

The poor of Brazil can take heart from the fact that José Sarney and his government are facing up to the need for land reform. But how much brighter would be their hopes for a new future if that reform were to establish the right of all Brazilians to share equally in the bounty of their country's natural resources?

1. *The Guardian*, June 3, 1985.
2. *The Times* (London), June 4, 1985.