

Rebellion in the countryside



By Guillermo Alvarado

This week, the city of Madrid, the Spanish capital, experienced an unusual situation when more than 500 tractors and other agricultural vehicles, along with farm animals, entered the city to demand that the government listen to their demands.

A similar situation has been going on for some weeks in several cities in the European Union, where companies and workers have warned that they are on the verge of ruin due to harsh EU policies and competition from imports from other countries.

The unrest is not new, but this time it is reaching limits not seen before, which gives an idea of all the anger accumulated over the last few years in a sector that is of vital importance anywhere in the world, because that is where most of the food for people comes from.

Although for now the complaints are directed at governments, in reality this is a structural problem, it has to do with the architecture of a bloc of nations with common rules, but where different realities are experienced.

You cannot compare the technologically developed agriculture of France with that of Portugal or Spain, but the rules are the same for both.

It is more or less the same as in the Eurozone with the common currency, where obligations affect powerful economies such as Germany in the same way as Greece or Italy, for example.

But, returning to the agricultural issue, there is another problem that creates a great deal of discontent and that is the issue of environmental and phytosanitary standards.

Within the EU, farmers must comply with strict rules on the use of pesticides, preservatives and other chemicals harmful to human health or environmental balance.

However, these measures do not apply in the same way to countries from which more and more farm products are imported.

This is clearly seen with tomatoes, as Spanish farmers must abide by the Common Agricultural Policy or face heavy fines, and that means an increase in their cost of production.

At the same time, however, thousands of tonnes of fresh or processed tomatoes are bought from abroad, in Morocco to name but one case, in the cultivation or processing of which European standards were not used at all.

Add to this the excessive bureaucracy and the undeniable impact of climate change and you will understand why Madrid, Paris, Athens or Copenhagen, among others, have become battlegrounds between farmers and security forces.

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