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**national farmers union**  
*In Union Is Strength*

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## **APRIL 17 MARKS INTERNATIONAL DAY OF FARMERS' STRUGGLE**

On April 17, 1996, nineteen members of a farmers' organization in Brazil were massacred when police opened fire on thousands of demonstrators demanding land reform. The victims were members of the Landless Movement (MST) of Brazil, a country where 1 percent of landholders own 50 percent of the land – and landless rural people are subject to torture and violence from police and vigilantes.

For the past decade, members of the National Farmers Union and other groups have commemorated April 17 as the International Day of Farmers' Struggle. The NFU is a member of La Via Campesina, a worldwide network of organizations representing millions of family farmers, fishers, agricultural workers and landless peasants.

NFU Women's President Colleen Ross of Iroquois, Ontario, said while April 17 commemorates the tragedy of 1996, it also inspires people to work for social and economic justice. She added that "Food Sovereignty" is a useful concept because it provides a unique "measuring stick" for the larger society. She noted that the higher the level of corporate ownership and control over the food system, the less value is placed on the needs and expertise of farmers. True democracy has been replaced by stage-managed "consultations" with a predetermined outcome.

"Food sovereignty should become the goal not only for Canada, but all countries around the globe," stated Ross. She and two other NFU representatives, Kalissa Regier and Martha Robbins, recently returned from a World Forum on Food Sovereignty held in Mali, Africa. Over 500 delegates representing 80 nations attended that forum.

Kalissa Regier, NFU Youth Vice-President, who farms near Laird, Saskatchewan, urged Canadians to "embrace Food Sovereignty as the model for the future of food and human rights." She said it is important to speak out against trade policies and regulations that deliberately impoverish rural people. The effect of these policies in many poor countries is devastating because people forced off the land migrate to large cities where they are reduced to a marginal existence.

Ross said the World Trade Organization (WTO), free trade deals and so-called "economic partnership agreements" have actually undermined food safety and food security. Meanwhile, these deals have aggravated the farm income crisis in Canada and elsewhere. She called on Canada to withdraw from the WTO negotiations, noting the so-

called “Doha Development Agenda” is actually designed to facilitate trade. “There can be no real development as long as farmers are forced to compete against each other in a race to the bottom,” she said. “The big winners are transnational corporations. It’s no coincidence that the recent attempts to destroy the Canadian Wheat Board (CWB) by the Harper administration are looked on favourably in WTO circles.”

Ross said policies based on a foundation of Food Sovereignty would promote “fair trade” that safeguards the right of producers to a reasonable income and the right of consumers to locally-grown and culturally-appropriate food that is safe and nutritious. “It would also ensure that the right to use and manage our lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those who actually produce the food and who have a direct stake in the sustainability of the environment,” she said. “The alternative is the system that currently exists, where these important elements are subject to the demands of the marketplace, which is controlled by a handful of large companies.”

Regier suggested April 17 offers an opportunity to take stock of where current Canadian agricultural policies have left farmers. “We’re in a situation where we have high inputs but low returns,” she said. “Prime farmland is increasingly being used to grow crops for fuel rather than food. Will farmers see any benefit, or will it all be captured by input suppliers, processors and margin traders?”

Ross said government agencies and departments, including the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) and Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) would do well to respect farmers, rather than circumvent them. “Within these institutions, consulting with farmers is not only discouraged but is actually frowned upon,” stated Ross. “Our greatest obstacle to obtaining Food Sovereignty in this country is trying to work with people whose job security depends on them *not* understanding our message.”

She concluded that policies based on the concept of Food Sovereignty offer the best hope for a healthy food system into the future. “We need to include the interests of the next generation in this debate,” she said. “Food sovereignty gives priority to local and national economies and markets, and empowers family farms while promoting environmental, social and economic sustainability.”

To access the International Food Sovereignty Declaration, please log on to:  
<http://www.nyeleni2007.org>

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