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Tensions Increase on Peru-Ecuador Border

by LADB Staff

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Despite more than two years of international efforts to resolve the border dispute between Ecuador and Peru, tensions erupted again in mid-October. Peru accused Ecuador of lobbing two grenades at a Peruvian military border post, a charge Ecuador flatly denied. The rhetoric and saber-rattling threaten to derail the negotiating process aimed at permanently resolving the dispute. Both governments have frequently resorted to beating the nationalist drum for political ends. However, Peru has turned up the heat in recent weeks, publicly dismissing Ecuador's territorial demands and encouraging public demonstrations to support its position.

On Oct. 9, Peruvian Foreign Minister Eduardo Ferrero Costa said Peru would not consider Ecuador's claim to sovereign access to the Amazon in the negotiations. Ferrero said the claim is "inadmissible and unacceptable" because the territories are Peru's, historically and legally (see NotiSur, 04/28/95). "Peru does not negotiate the cession of territories that are its own," said Ferrero. "Territorial negotiations ended with the 1942 Rio de Janeiro Protocol, by which the border between Peru and Ecuador was definitively delimited."

A statement from the Ecuadoran Embassy in Lima expressed "surprise and concern" at Ferrero's declaration. "The foreign minister's statements go against the commitment to a moratorium on declarations to the press about the peace process being carried out in Brasilia," read the embassy statement.

Ecuadoran Defense Minister Ramiro Ricaurte said the "inflexible, longstanding position of Peru on the territorial issue" is worrisome. "We are hoping there will be some flexibility in Peru's position."

Peru accuses Ecuador of grenade attack

On Oct. 19, Peru's Defense Ministry said Ecuadoran soldiers at the Nashiro border post fired an illumination grenade followed by an explosive grenade toward Peru's Vencedores post. The second grenade landed within 400 meters of the border post but did not injure any Peruvian soldiers, who remain "on permanent alert," according to the Ministry. Peru formally protested the incident to the international Mision de Observadores Militares Ecuador-Peru (MOMEPE), and called the incident a "serious provocation" that could prejudice the talks. The Ecuadoran government denied the incident ever happened. "It would be absurd for us to do something like this when we are searching for a definitive solution to this problem," said Ecuador's vice foreign minister, Diego Ribadeneira.

Peruvians have staged large demonstrations on seven occasions during the past month at times organized by the military to support Peru's stand against Ecuador. On Oct. 21, crowds rallied in the northern cities of Chiclayo, Trujillo, Tumbes, and two towns in the Ancash region. "We are in favor of peace," said Trujillo mayor Jose Murgia. "We want to send a message to the whole world that the protocol should be respected. We also want to tell the world that this city is ready to defend our homeland." In addition, Peru's media have run myriad anti-Ecuador articles, and many public

figures connected to the government have condemned Quito's position in the dispute. Peruvian stocks and the value of the local sol currency dipped on fear of renewed border tensions with Ecuador. But military officials and observers on both sides of the heavily militarized border reported calm.

Accusations called politically motivated

With both countries taking an apparently inflexible position regarding the Amazon access, many fear that another armed conflict is likely. Peruvian army sources said large numbers of troops including crack commandos usually deployed to fight guerrillas have moved north in the last few months. Some observers in Lima have expressed concern that hard-liners in the Peruvian military might be preparing for a new conflict on the border, either to strengthen its negotiating position, to redress 1995 losses, or to bolster President Alberto Fujimori's sinking support. Manuel D'Ornellas, director of the daily *Expreso*, said in a recent editorial that "it is almost certain that Ecuadoran troops who launched the grenades did so knowing they had the support of their superiors." But he added, "We also cannot deny that there are those in our country who are interested in promoting an armed confrontation. For political speculation to raise the political leverage of the president or in a desire for revenge."

David Scott Palmer, international relations expert at Boston University, said sectors of the military could be behind the recent increased belligerence. "There are some elements within the [Peruvian] military that want revenge [for the perceived loss in 1995], and they are really pressing to do something to make that happen," said Scott Palmer. "But I do not see how that group can prevail." However, former foreign minister and retired Gen. Mercado Jarrin suggested Peru's strategy could be to plunge into Ecuador and withdraw only when Quito accepts the border set out in the 1942 Rio Protocol treaty.

Others are hopeful that with both Quito and Lima publicly insisting they want to negotiate a peaceful settlement, a new outbreak of violence can be averted. Sources close to Peru's negotiating team say Fujimori is opposed to another war, and many analysts think he can curb the military if he chooses to do so. Ecuador also has its hawks but is probably less likely to start a war since the military balance tipped in Peru's favor last year when it purchased MiG-29 fighter planes. Shadow cast on upcoming negotiations The last round of negotiations between Peru and Ecuador, which began in mid-April (see *NotiSur*, 05/02/97), ended on Sept. 25, with the two countries signing a document that spelled out their "impasses." The negotiating teams are scheduled to meet again in Brasilia Nov. 24-28 to analyze those points and begin the final process to find a mutually agreeable solution.

All previous meetings have merely set the stage for this key phase of negotiations, which will take place under the auspices of the four guarantor countries of the Rio Protocol: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and the US. Despite the latest war of words, on Oct. 21 Fujimori confirmed that Peru would attend the next round of peace talks with Ecuador. "The conversations must go on," Fujimori said. "We are confident that we must maintain peace for the progress of both our countries." But the Peruvian leader also pointedly restated Lima's rejection of Quito's territorial demand. "The Rio de Janeiro Protocol is very clear," said Fujimori. "It talks of free navigation, not sovereign access [to the Amazon]. The foreign minister has stated that, and the Peruvian people are very clear on

this matter." [Sources: Deutsche Press Agentur, 10/21/97; Reuter, 10/07/97, 10/09/97, 10/12/97, 10/20-22/97; Notimex, 10/10/97, 10/14/97, 10/22/97; Spanish news service EFE, 10/21/97, 10/22/97; El Nuevo Herald, Hoy (Ecuador), 10/22/97]

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