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LADB Staff

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Ecuador, Peru Look for Peace Amid Talk of War

by LADB Staff

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Talks between Ecuador and Peru to end their longstanding border dispute, which were held in Brasilia Nov. 24-26, ended with little progress. Even while the formal meetings were underway, speculation continued that the military, especially in Peru, may be pushing to resolve the dispute by force. Moreover, recent arms purchases further undermine efforts to find a peaceful solution. The Brasilia talks began the second phase of the lengthy peace process that has been guided by Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and the US the four guarantor countries of the 1942 Rio de Janeiro Protocol, which ended the most serious conflict between the two Andean countries this century. Following another outbreak of violence in 1995, the guarantor countries agreed to oversee efforts to resolve the conflict (see NotiSur, 2/10/95 and 03/10/95).

Before the Brasilia talks began, Brazilian Foreign Minister Luis Felipe Lampreia stressed their importance. "We are convinced that, today more than ever, it is necessary to redouble efforts to strengthen the atmosphere of rapprochement and calm to overcome the existing impasse," said Lampreia. The talks ended, however, without reaching an agreement on the timetable for dealing with the four major areas of disagreement, although a date for the next meeting was set for Jan. 12-16. Peru and Ecuador issued a statement on Nov. 26 that commits them to "examine in good faith" a proposal for commerce and navigation treaties, an agreement on border integration, the formation of a bilateral commission on mutual trust, and a proposal to demarcate the disputed border strip.

Although the document contained little of substance, delegates from both countries praised the outcome of the meeting. "Postponement of discussion on the timetable until the next meeting is not the fault of the Ecuadorans," said Fernando de Trazegnies, head of the Peruvian legal team. "Organizing the timetable is a very complicated process." Ecuadoran Foreign Minister Jose Ayala denied reports that a target date had been set to sign a final agreement at the Summit of the Americas, which will be held in Santiago in April 1998.

Diplomatic sources said that the US was encouraging finalizing the peace process at the summit. "We are not thinking about that, but if it happened to coincide, I think it would be an excellent opportunity," said Ayala. Neither side willing to give on key issues Talk of a final agreement seems premature at this point, since negotiations on the key issues seem to be going nowhere, especially with Quito's continued insistence on sovereign access to the Amazon. Peru refuses to even discuss that point or Ecuador's claim that the border, as defined by the Rio Protocol, lacks geographical authenticity.

At the meeting in Brasilia, Peruvian delegates presented a proposal from President Alberto Fujimori that would give Ecuador access to the Amazon and to port facilities, plus navigation rights on the river. But it would not concede any territory, making it unlikely that Ecuador will accept the proposal. Following the meeting, the Peruvian Foreign Ministry issued a communique saying the

border demarcation is still the major difference between the two countries and that any resolution must conform to the Rio Protocol. Internal political situations affecting strategies

According to some analysts, the Fujimori administration made its latest offer on access to the Amazon in the belief that Ecuador's internal political and economic problems might entice that country to accept the proposal. Nevertheless, military sectors in Peru continue to send out signals that war is still a possibility. This has led to speculation of a rift between Fujimori and hard-liners among the military and intelligence services. Fujimori's increasingly poor chance of being re-elected has emboldened military hawks to push for a solution by force, say some analysts.

According to the Peruvian newspaper La Reforma, a report from the Servicio de Inteligencia Nacional (SIN), which was circulated among military and government officials, considers "war imminent." However, Ecuador's military chief, Gen. Paco Moncayo, made a strong appeal for peace in an interview published in Peru. "The problem between Peru and Ecuador has no military solution," said Moncayo. "The only solution is a political one, a diplomatic one, and therefore we hope for flexibility on both sides." Given the lack of discernable progress at this latest meeting, military hawks on both sides are expected to exert more pressure for a solution by force.

Still, despite the saber rattling, military officers have held several meetings on the border, most recently on Nov. 30, where they discussed methods to avoid armed incidents and increase mutual confidence. The meetings were held under the auspices of the Mision de Observadores Militares (MOMEPE), comprising officers from the guarantor countries who have been stationed on the border since the 1995 conflict ended (see NotiSur, 01/31/97). Armies buy arms to maintain peace Also complicating efforts for peace are recent revelations in both Peru and Ecuador of arms purchases or negotiations to acquire arms. Peru recently announced the purchase of a fleet of MIG-29 combat planes, the most powerful in Latin America, which brought charges from Ecuador of "Peruvian militarism."

Shortly after that, however, Ecuador's air force commander, Gen. Hernan Quiroz, announced that Ecuador is negotiating the purchase of 50 US-made F-16 or F-18 fighter planes, which are on a par with the MIGs. This time, the charges of militarism came from Peru, which also questioned the ethics of a US weapons sale when the US is one of the guarantor countries. Washington promptly denied that it had approved the sale, and some sources said the Ecuadoran military's announcement was merely a trial balloon, indicating the country's interest in warplanes from other sources. "Ecuador obviously needs a deterrent force to maintain its negotiating power," said Ecuador's vice minister of foreign relations, Diego Ribadeneira. "Peru did it and Ecuador could do it. Ecuador is a sovereign country." However, Peruvian congressional delegates called Ecuador's possible purchase a "provocation," and used it to whip up anti-Ecuadoran sentiments. (Sources: Spanish news service EFE, 10/24/97, 11/05/97, 11/09/97, 11/14/97; Associated Press, 11/18/97; Inter Press Service, 11/11/97, 11/24/97; Notimex, 11/05/97, 11/28/97; Reuter, 11/06/97, 11/25/97, 11/27/97, 11/30/97)

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