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LADB Staff

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Ecuador, Peru Reach Breakthrough in Negotiations on Border Dispute

by LADB Staff

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In mid-January, negotiators from Ecuador and Peru announced a breakthrough in talks regarding their border dispute that may lead to a peace treaty by May. The two countries signed a timetable for simultaneous negotiations on four areas of disagreement and said they are optimistic their differences can be resolved.

On Jan. 19 in Rio de Janeiro, head negotiators Fernando de Trazegnies of Peru and Edgar Teran of Ecuador signed the agreement, as did delegates from the four guarantor countries of the 1941 Rio de Janeiro Protocol Argentina, Brazil, Chile, and the US. The guarantor countries have been overseeing the peace process following the undeclared war between Ecuador and Peru in early 1995 (see NotiSur, 12/05/97).

"The parties agree to join forces so that this process can culminate at the latest by May 30, 1998," said Brazil's Foreign Minister Luiz Felipe Lampreia. "The terms are ambitious, but in my judgment perfectly attainable."

Four working groups comprising representatives from Peru, Ecuador and the four guarantors will begin deliberations Feb. 17, the anniversary of the Itamaraty Treaty that ended the 1955 conflict. The groups will operate in the capital cities of the guarantor nations (see NotiSur, 02/10/95 and 03/10/95). The issues that must be settled are a final definition of the disputed 78-km stretch of border, to be negotiated in Brasilia; navigation rights for Ecuador on the Amazon River, negotiated in Buenos Aires; cross-border trade, in Washington, DC; and joint security measures, in Santiago. "We have overcome the most critical moments in relations between our countries," said negotiator Teran. "The final phase of the bilateral negotiations will be much smoother."

Ecuador could be granted "functional sovereignty"

The most difficult issue will be access to the Amazon, which Ecuador says must be sovereign, a concept rejected by Peru. The Guayaquil daily El Telegrafo said the Rio agreement establishes the possibility of giving Ecuador "functional sovereignty" on the Amazon. Ecuadoran Foreign Minister Jose Ayala Lasso said the concept has been used in Europe, Asia, and other areas of Latin America, and represents a modern evolution of the traditional definition of sovereignty. Under the Rio agreement, Ecuador's access to the Amazon should be "free, unrestricted, continuous, and in perpetuity," said Ayala Lasso.

The prospect of a lasting peace received mostly favorable reactions in both countries. "This is an important and very positive step in the effort to resolve our differences," said Peruvian Foreign Minister Eduardo Ferrero Costa in Lima. "It is a time for optimism for it opens up a new stage that both the Peruvian and Ecuadoran governments hope can be concluded by May 30." US assistant secretary of state for Latin America Peter Romero said the US "is more optimistic than ever" that

a final peace treaty can be achieved. He added that once a treaty is signed and the US is no longer a guarantor, Washington will consider requests for arms from Peru and Ecuador. "As soon as our role as guarantor is finished...we can analyze any request," said Romero. "We do not in any way want an arms race, but there are very legitimate desires by military institutions to modernize their inventories."

Ecuador considers referendum

Ecuadoran government official Wilson Merino said President Fabian Alarcon is considering a referendum on the peace process. Following the meeting in Rio, Alarcon met with Patricio Vivanco, president of Ecuador's Tribunal Supremo Electoral (TSE). Vivanco said, however, that he would not support a referendum that coincided with presidential elections, scheduled for May (see NotiSur, 01/16/98). "It is essential to avoid contaminating a referendum with general elections or vice versa," said Vivanco. "I think Ecuadorans are interested in keeping the territorial issue separate from electoral processes."

Ecuador's ambassador in Lima, Horacio Sevilla, warned that a referendum could complicate the negotiating process, giving the impression that agreements reached at the negotiating table could be changed through a popular consultation. He said a referendum could be misinterpreted in Peru, even though the Peruvian government understands that Alarcon's intention is to obtain the people's support. Meanwhile, Brazil's ambassador in Quito, Osmar Choffi, said the guarantor countries would maintain the presence of the Mision de Observadores Militares para Ecuador y Peru (MOMEPE) on the border as long as it is needed. [Sources: Inter Press Service, Reuter, 01/19/98; Notimex, Spanish news service EFE, 01/19/98, 01/20/98]

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