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Miss Universe and OAS Summit Protests

by LADB Staff

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The 2004 Miss Universe beauty pageant and Organization of American States (OAS) Summit turned Quito, along with other parts of Ecuador, into a center for protest for more than a week in late May and early June. Indigenous organizations clashed with police as they demonstrated against the presidency of Lucio Gutierrez, striking fishers blocked tour boats that were trying to reach the Galapagos Islands, opponents of Plan Colombia sprayed herbicide outside the Colombian embassy, and pamphlet bombs exploded in three cities.

Protestors target president, IMF

President Gutierrez faces growing demands for his resignation, as powerful Indian movements, which helped bring him to power, have soured on his economic policies. Small pamphlet bombs exploded in three cities and Ecuador's powerful Indian movement blocked the Panamerican Highway on June 7 as part of planned demonstrations to demand the resignation of President Gutierrez. The violence came as the OAS opened a meeting in Quito, the capital.

Foreign ministers from 34 countries, including US Secretary of State Colin Powell, gathered to discuss regional problems and to elect a new OAS secretary-general (see NotiCen, June 10, 2004). Three bombs exploded in Quito, one in Guayaquil, Ecuador's largest city, and three in Cuenca in southern Ecuador. No injuries were reported.

Police said the pamphlets in the bombs carried the name of the Grupo de Combatientes Populares (GCP). The pamphlets criticized the OAS meeting and the government's economic policies. Elsewhere, dozens of Indians managed to block the Panamerican Highway, which crosses the country from north to south, in two places north of Quito. Police later cleared the highway and moved on, but Indians returned to pile basketball-sized rocks on it, blocking traffic again, according to radio news reports from the area.

Leonidas Iza, the leader of the Confederacion de Nacionalidades Indigenas de Ecuador (CONAIE), said he wanted the OAS delegates to "see there is hunger, there is deep poverty, there is corruption" in Ecuador. Indians make up about 4 million of Ecuador's 12.5 million people, and Iza said his movement represents 85% of them.

Gutierrez, 47, a former army colonel who ran on a populist platform and presented himself as a crusader against corruption, would not have won election in a November 2002 runoff without the support of the Indian movement. In gratitude, he named four members of Pachakutik, CONAIE's political party, to his Cabinet when he took office in January 2003, giving Indians a share of power for the first time in Ecuador's history.
But the coalition fell apart in August 2003 when Pachakutik congressional delegates refused to support his decision to cut subsidies on food and cooking fuel. He fired the Cabinet members who belonged to Pachakutik and sought the support of Ecuador's largest rightist party, the Partido Social Cristiano (PSC), a party he savaged during the campaign.

"He has betrayed Ecuador. He has betrayed the indigenous movement," Gilberto Talahua, head of Pachakutik, said in an interview at his sparsely furnished headquarters. "And the worst thing is that he has no program, no plan for governing. He simply follows the guidelines of the International Monetary Fund (IMF)."

Gutierrez's popularity has plunged in recent months to as low as 16%. Polls show that Ecuadorans do not trust what he says and view him as an inept president. A week ago, demands were growing in Ecuador's Congress for his ouster after US officials placed his welfare minister, Patricio Acosta, on a list of foreign officials suspected of corruption. After days of dragging his feet, Gutierrez fired Acosta, one of his closest confidantes, and the demands in Congress for his ouster eased. But Gutierrez's former Indian allies are determined to force him from office with massive street protests.

Finance Minister Mauricio Pozo quits Adding to Gutierrez's Cabinet casualty list, Finance Minister Mauricio Pozo has resigned. Officials announced Pozo's resignation on June 1, leaving President Gutierrez to find a replacement to lead an economic policy approved by international lenders but unpopular at home.

"Regrettably, the resignation has been presented," Interior Minister Raul Baca told Channel 2 television without saying why Pozo decided to leave a post he had held since Gutierrez's inauguration in January 2003. Pozo was not immediately available for comment. Baca said Gutierrez was trying to persuade Pozo to retract his resignation, but said that possible successors included Mauricio Yepez, the current head of Ecuador's Central Bank.

Pozo and Gutierrez have been criticized by indigenous leaders and politicians for implementing tightfisted economic policies to meet with approval from lenders like the IMF in Washington. Critics say the austerity measures unfairly hurt the poor. Supporters credit the penny pinching with helping Ecuador achieve 3.5% growth last year with an inflation rate of just under 3%.

**Alternative "misses" march outside**

Miss Universe Ecuadoran authorities had looked forward to the Miss Universe competition, which immediately preceded the OAS summit, as an opportunity to attract tourist dollars and raise the country's international reputation. Protestors took it as an opportunity to put their grievances on an international stage, accusing the government of trying to hide the nation's poverty behind the pageant.

Indigenous environmentalists dressed as "Misseria" (misery), "Missil" (missile), "Miss War," and "Missnusvalida" (Miss Illegitimacy) turned various streets into runways in the Ecuadoran capital.
as they protested against the government. More than a thousand people carried paper puppets and
signs that parodied the Miss Universe contestants, wearing sashes across their chests to identify
aspects of the Ecuadoran reality, where 80% of the country’s inhabitants live in poverty.

Lampooning the typical dress of Miss Ecuador, which has provoked criticism in the country, a
septuagenarian led the peaceful march dressed only in underwear and a bell-like structure made
of copper and adorned with flowers that left her gaunt figure visible. She called the Miss Universe
event "a farce that seeks to put makeup over the country's poverty."

Another of the campesina and indigenous marchers from the tropical province of Guayas dressed
in provocative clothes, identifying herself as "Miss Right to a Living" and carried a pineapple as her
scepter. In the days prior to the event, Miss Bolivia, 20-year-old Gabriela Oviedo, caused a national
furoir after she called herself a tall white woman and not one of the short Indian campesinas for
which she said her nation was widely known. The comment led to calls for her resignation and
she later apologized. Bolivian Foreign Minister Juan Ignacio Siles called Oviedo's comments "very
lamentable" and said they showed "a lack of judgment" and "ignorance."

Fishers block tour boats to Galapagos Island

Protesting Galapagos fishers blockaded docks with their boats, preventing hundreds of tourists from
visiting key sites on the famed islands, officials said on June 4. The protest was the latest by fishers
demanding reforms of catch limits on sea urchins and sea cucumbers, sold as delicacies in Asia.
Authorities had decided to limit the harvesting of sea cucumbers with an eye toward preserving the
species, a decision that led to the protest.

About 1,000 fishers, migrants from the Ecuadoran mainland, work the Galapagos waters. Park
director Edwin Naula told the Associated Press by telephone that fishers were also holding sit-ins
at three Galapagos National Park offices on the island chain home to a number of rare animals that
inspired Charles Darwin's theory of evolution.

"On Thursday, some 200 passengers on eight tour boats couldn't land to visit Suarez Point and
Gardner Bay on Espanola Island," Galapagos Chamber of Tourism president Hugo Andrade said.
He said the tourists were blocked by a flotilla of 20 fishing boats and were forced to land elsewhere
on the islands.

Fishers held a two-day sit-in at two national park offices last week demanding an end to all limits
but suspended it after Environmental Minister Fabian Valdiviezo agreed to meet with them. The
fishers returned to protest after Valdiviezo said they must travel to Quito to air their grievances.
Authorities reported that the fishers had ended their protest the night of June 6, returning the
scientific installations they held under their control, and that Valdiviezo had scheduled a meeting
with them for June 11.

Protestors spray herbicide at Colombian embassy
Apart from the CONAIE clashes with police and the parodic march on Miss Universe, protest in Quito also extended to the Colombian Embassy, where protestors in white protective suits and respirators sprayed herbicide on plants there.

Environmentalists and border dwellers in Ecuador have complained about environmental damage from Colombia's program of aerial spraying with the herbicide glyphosate, designed to eradicate coca crops. They say it causes harm to residents and animal and plant life in the border region, while many Ecuadorans have also spoken out against their government involving itself in the US-funded anti-narcotics program called Plan Colombia.

Alexis Ponce, president of the Asociacion Permanente de Derechos Humanos (APDH), was one of the "fumigators" of the building. "Any exaggerated complaint for alleged and unproven effects to the skin and the nearby environment, please report to the OAS and the patriotic Ecuadoran Foreign Ministry," said Ponce through a loudspeaker. At his side, of course, were Miss Plan Colombia, Miss Fumigations and Miss Glyphosate.

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